

How the Industrial Revolution Helped Forge a Path for Science Fiction

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Heritage Square History Blog

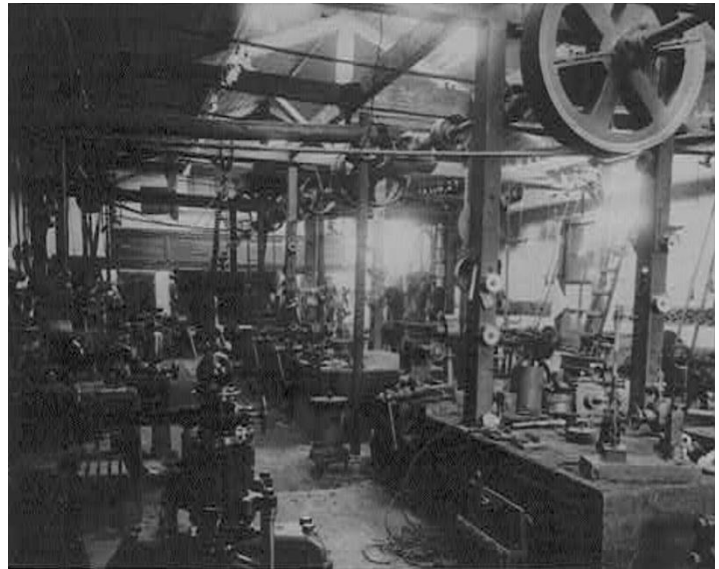
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Did you know...

Have you ever read classic science fiction novels like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein or perhaps flipped on the TV to the SyFy channel for a thrilling movie? Science fiction is a genre of entertainment many of us have come to know and love, but where did it come from?

Interestingly enough, part of the roots of science fiction can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution – happening just before the Victorian Era.

The Industrial Revolution refers to a significant period of profound societal, economic, and technological change that took place from the late 18th century to the mid-19th century. It marked a transition from primarily agrarian and handcrafted economies to industrialized and machine-driven ones. The Industrial Revolution was a massive shift in human history, marking an era of unprecedented advancement and transformation. Beyond its tangible impact on industry and infrastructure, this period served as the fertile soil from which the seeds of science fiction grew and bloomed.



An electric generating factory, c1880,
Library of Congress

The inception of science fiction as a recognizable genre can be traced back to the early 19th century. While elements of speculative fiction and fantastical storytelling existed in earlier works (see our [September 2023 blog article](#) to learn more), it wasn't until this era that science fiction as a distinct literary genre began to take shape.

The Birth of Machines

The rise of machinery and mechanization during the late 18th and early 19th centuries captivated the human imagination. Factories, steam engines, and automated processes reshaped daily life.

The invention of steam power, mechanization, and mass production dramatically altered the fabric of society. As people grappled with the ramifications of this technological leap, it stirred curiosity about the future and the potential consequences of unchecked progress. Research by Britannica emphasizes how this technological upheaval fueled societal transformation and sparked the human imagination, setting the stage for envisioning future worlds and technological possibilities.

Perhaps this advancement in machinery inspired authors like Jules Verne when writing the book 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. The story follows the thrilling underwater adventures of Professor Pierre Aronnax, his loyal servant Conseil, and Ned Land, a Canadian harpooner, as they embark on a journey aboard the submarine, Nautilus, commanded by the mysterious Captain Nemo. Submarines as we know them today were not physically in existence when this book was published in 1870, and it's likely that the Industrial Revolution (IR) was a key component in Verne's inspiration.

Technicological Optimism and Distopian Fears

The dual nature of this newfound technology sparked divergent narratives in literature. Some envisioned a utopian future where machines liberated humanity from menial labor, fostering boundless creativity and leisure. However, alongside this optimistic outlook lurked a darker narrative: the fear of machines overpowering humans, leading to dystopian worlds devoid of human control.

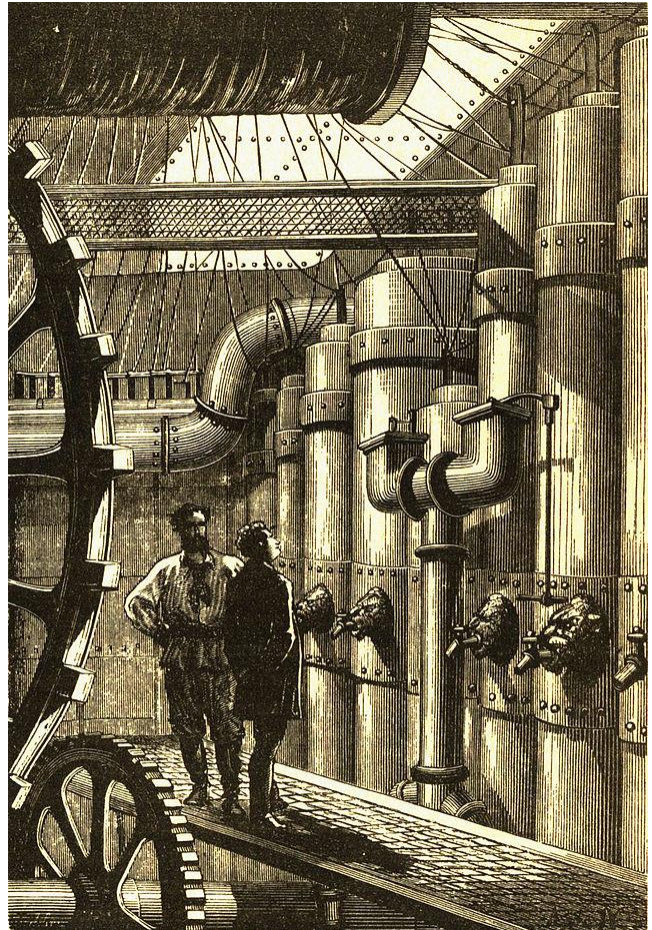


Illustration of the engines of the Nautilus, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea

Here are a few of examples of this in specific theme in Victorian literature:

- Erewhon by Samuel Butler (1872) – This satirical novel presents a fictional country where machines are banned because they are believed to have attained consciousness. It critiques various aspects of Victorian society, including the nature of morality, the limitations of technology, and the role of institutions.
- News from Nowhere by William Morris (1890) – In this utopian/dystopian novel, the protagonist wakes up in a future society that appears ideal but, upon closer examination, reveals its flaws. The story questions societal progress, the impact of industrialization, and the possibility of creating a truly perfect society.
- The Time Machine by H.G. Wells (1895) – H.G. Wells' novel explores a future world where society has evolved into two distinct species: the Eloi, who live a life of leisure

and luxury, and the Morlocks, who dwell underground and maintain the machinery that supports the Eloi. The story serves as a commentary on class division and the potential consequences of societal evolution.

While these Victorian-era novels may not fit the modern classification of dystopian literature as we understand it today, they offer glimpses into speculative and critical examinations of societal structures, technological advancements, and the human condition. These works laid a foundation for the development of dystopian themes in literature in the following centuries.

Rise of the Machines

Authors of the time tapped into societal anxieties surrounding unchecked scientific progress. In Frankenstein, Mary Shelley's cautionary tale echoed concerns about the ethical boundaries of scientific experimentation and the potential consequences of "playing God." Both Shelley's classic and works such as H.G. Wells' The Time Machine explore the varying ethical and moral dilemmas and the imagined possibilities of their time. The New York Public Library's exploration delves into how these literary works grappled with the consequences of scientific experimentation and the societal implications of technological advancements.

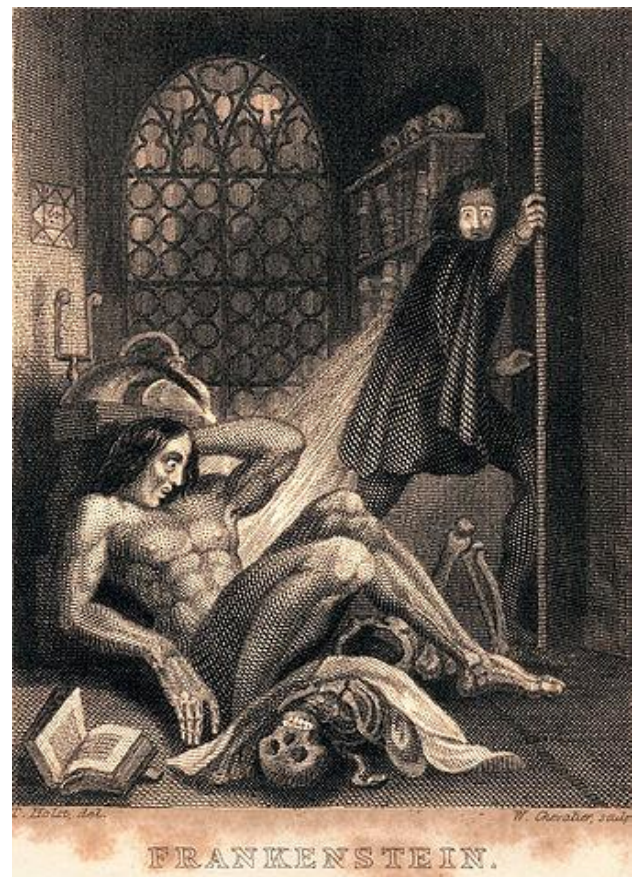
Exploring Uncharted Realms

The Industrial Revolution expanded global horizons, fostering exploration and discovery. These adventuresome exploits inspired narratives centered on space travel, exploring new worlds, and encountering alien species. Other novels by author Jules Verne (From the Earth to the Moon and its sequel, Around the Moon) envisioned fantastical voyages to the moon, setting the stage for what would become some of the core elements of science fiction.

Social Commentary and Technological Speculation

Science fiction became a vessel for commentary on societal issues. Writers used futuristic settings to critique the flaws of their own era. Themes of inequality, social injustice, and the ethical dilemmas of technological advancement became woven into the fabric of the genre.

The burgeoning technological landscape found its reflection in literature, giving birth to narratives that explored the promises and perils of unchecked progress. The relationship between the Industrial Revolution and literature sheds light on how authors of the time grappled with the impact of machinery on human existence, laying the groundwork for the themes that would become quintessential to science fiction.



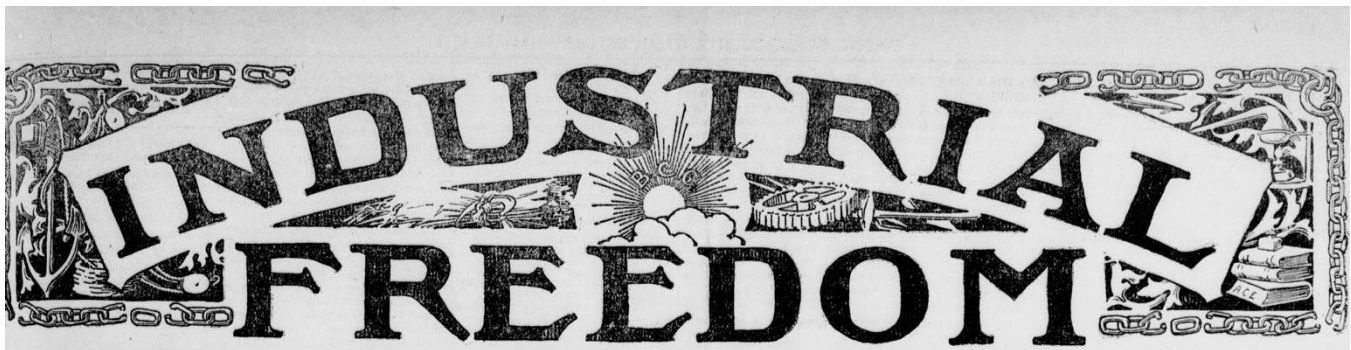
An illustration from the original edition of Frankenstein: or The Modern Prometheus

The Legacy of the Industrial Revolution and Science Fiction

The Industrial Revolution stands as a watershed moment in human history, fostering an era of groundbreaking technological advancements that not only reshaped society but also sowed the seeds for an entirely new genre of literature: science fiction.

The impact of the Industrial Revolution on science fiction remains immeasurable. Its legacy continues to shape our contemporary understanding of the genre, inspiring tales of futuristic societies, advanced technology, and the intricate dance between humanity and innovation. Through the lens of technological progress and societal change, authors crafted narratives that challenged, intrigued, and captivated audiences, ultimately birthing a genre that continues to evolve and thrive in the modern era.

The links between the Industrial Revolution and science fiction offer a rich tapestry of exploration and speculation, illuminating the profound impact of historical change on the creative minds that envisioned our future. As we continue to navigate our own technological revolution, it's essential to reflect on the lessons embedded within these early science fiction tales, for they serve as cautionary reminders and guiding lights into the uncharted territories of tomorrow.



Vol. 1

EDISON, SKAGIT COUNTY, WASH., SATURDAY, MAY 23, 1898.

No. 4

<h3>The People Should Own the Railroads.</h3> <p>A United States Senate Document Reveals the Methods by which the Railroads Defraud the People. Public Ownership and Operation of the Roads would Save Millions of Money and Prevent Corruption.</p> <p>There is much talk concerning the 1,000,000 annual deficit of the postal department, the railroads and their ends urging that postal rates should be increased to cover this deficit. The following given below will show that, on</p>	<p>road, asked the Postmaster-General why the Seaboard Air Line has been singled out for criticism for stuffing the mails when it was well known that</p> <p>All Railroads Practiced the Same Fraud Upon the Government.</p> <p>The way in which this particular fraud happened to be brought to light, the evidence is taken, was that some agents bungled matters, and a little newspaper at Ellenboro', N. C., published a short article headed "A Mistake," stating that Senator Gordon, in mailing documents to his constituents, had by mistake addressed them to agents along the Seaboard Air Line to</p>	<p>ous demand from the general public the abuse goes on unscathed.</p> <p>The question of how great a reduction should be made in the general charges of the railroads is not one to be settled offhand upon a permanent basis. All that legislation can accomplish immediately is a reduction of railroad charges to the Government corresponding to the reduction in general freight charges during the last quarter of a century. The present charges are practically those of 1873. Between that year and 1878 there was a nominal reduction of fourteen per cent.; but as paper money in 1873 was at a discount of eleven per cent., the charge in gold</p>	<h4>THE WORKERS AND WAR.</h4> <p>Anon.</p> <p>When'er contending princes fight For private pique or public right, Armies are raised, and fleets are manned; They combat both by sea and land. When after many battles past, Both 'tired with blows, make peace at last. What is it, after all, the people get? Why, taxes, widows, wooden legs and debt.</p> <h4>MUSINGS OF A MOSSBACK.</h4> <p>[Written for Industrial Freedom.]</p> <p>A facetious friend refers to the "in-</p>	<p>spending money of the children incorporated in it.</p> <p>The original discoverers and workers of this Eldorado creek might have been expected to object to this invasion of their rights, but such does not seem to be the case. Whether they are afraid to call attention to the monstrosities of the system or find their income enhanced by the extra working I don't know.</p> <p>My objection to this is a selfish one. I like to see the young ones enjoy their money. I know they can get more fun out of 5 cents than I can out of \$2, and I never had any "money to burn." It is necessary to all these</p>
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Information for this article was found online through the [Library of Congress archives](#), [Smithsonian libraries](#), [Britannica](#), and [Biography](#).