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The Search for Other Worlds

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### The Doom of First Contact

As talk for the search for extraterrestrial life becomes more prevalent and serious, the question of what first contact between different species would mean has arisen. This idea of first contact has made an appearance throughout a lot of science-fiction writing concerning the search for other life. “Bloodchild” by Octavia Butler is one of the many stories concerning contact between two different species. Many stories like Butler’s show a repeating occurrence of one of the species benefiting from this contact in some way while it is to the detriment of the other. Butler and her peers may be correct in their possible visions if first contact in human history is any proof. History has shown that first, physical contact between two different species is to the detriment of one of the civilizations. Stories like “Bloodchild” suggest that two very different alien species with different cultures, languages, and biological makeups cannot coexist or interact with one another in such a way that both benefit from this contact.

As seen in science-fiction and human history alike, contact between two civilizations may bring debilitating diseases to one (or both) of the species. In the novel *The 5th Wave*, an alien species begins to systematically wipe out the human population. Their plan is to eliminate human beings in waves. One of the waves is designed to take out the human population by way of plague. The aliens cleverly use humans’ tendency to congregate against them, and humanity dies off until there is only a few left. *The 5th Wave* provides an example of what could possibly happen if humans came into contact with extraterrestrials. This novel reveals that interaction

with another civilization may result in the introduction and spread of a pathogen that could lead to mankind's end. Many other stories have also used diseases as a tool to show what could happen if two species made physical contact. The short story "And the Moon Be Still as Bright" by Ray Bradbury shows how a disease could spread, accidentally, from one species to another. Hathaway, a character from the story, tells his crew that the Martians died of chicken pox, a relatively harmless disease to humans. The crew is initially in disbelief, but this is dispelled as Hathaway states, "Yes. I made tests. Chicken pox. It did things to the Martians it never did to Earth Men. Their metabolism reacted differently, I suppose. Burnt them black and dried them out to brittle flakes. But it's chicken pox, nevertheless" (Bradbury 69). These science fiction novelists have recognized that the possibility of two different civilizations introducing deadly pathogens to one another is high.

Science fiction novelists who brought up the idea that contact between two species may introduce deadly diseases to one (or both) species are not naive in their beliefs. Human history has proven that this circumstance is highly likely. When the Europeans opened up the channels between themselves and Native Americans, they introduced numerous diseases, such as smallpox, that would eventually wipe out a vast majority of the population. The text *The American Years: Chronologies of American History and Experience* states, "As Europeans (and their African slaves) came into contact with Native Americans, they passed along diseases like diphtheria, measles, and smallpox, to which Native Americans had no immunity. The consequences of these epidemics were devastating to Native Americans. Entire cultures died out..." (Gross et al. 8). Interspecies relations means the trading of not only information, ideas, technology, etc, but also the trading of diseases, which may result in the near extermination of a species like those of the humans in *The 5th Wave* and, in human history, the Native Americans.

Even when it is not the intention of one of the species to use deadly diseases as a biological weapon, history demonstrates that one species can unknowingly kill another by introducing them to a lethal virus. There will most likely be differences in biological makeup that will lead to the spread of diseases that could prove fatal to a species. This suggests that the deadly effect of disease exchange from one species to another is inevitable.

The level of technological advancement of a species is another example that shows how physical contact between two species could be disastrous. The novel *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells provides a good example of how a less technologically advanced species would fair against a more technologically advanced species. Author of the text *Searching for Extraterrestrial Intelligence: SETI Past, Present, and Future* writes, “In Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*, technologically advanced Lowellian Martians launch a dramatic invasion of Earth: the War of the Worlds “isn’t a war...any more than there’s war between men and ants” (Shuch 354). If a more advanced species were to come in contact with humans would mankind be able to fend off any of their threats? Mankind could only hope that the visitors are benevolent, but, as human history has shown, that will not happen. First contact between Europeans and Native Americans gives mankind an idea of what to expect should it meet a more technologically advanced species. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, Diamond writes

Military technology was far more potent in Eurasia than in the Americas. European weapons were steel swords, lances, and daggers, supplemented by small firearms and artillery, while body armor and helmets were also made of solid steel or else of chain mail. In place of steel, Native Americans used clubs and axes of stone or wood (occasionally copper in the Andes), slings, bows and arrows, and quilted armor, constituting much less effective protection and weaponry. (358)

These examples tell mankind that contact between species that are on two different levels of advancement could be devastating for the less technologically advanced species.

History and science fiction suggests that contact between a less advanced and a more advanced species will be catastrophic for the less technologically advanced species. In fact, many scientists have joined in to argue this assertion. In the text *First Contact*, Stephen Hawking, noted theoretical physicist and cosmologist, is quoted as having said “We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn’t want to meet,” continuing to say “ I imagine they might exist in massive ships, having used up all the resources from their home planet. Such advanced aliens would perhaps become nomads, looking to conquer and colonize whatever planets they can reach. If aliens ever visit us, I think the outcome would be as much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn’t turn out very well for the Native Americans” (Kaufman 177). If mankind extrapolates instances in human history to predict the outcome of contact between different species, then the chance of a mutually beneficial outcome is impossible.

So far, the decimation of a species has been seen to be the outcome of interspecies contact, but this is not the only possible outcome. The superior species (due to technology or some other kind of advancement) could subject the inferior species to be slaves to them and their rule. In the short story “Bloodchild” by Octavia E. Butler, humans are involved in a parasitic relationship with aliens, and this relationship can lead to extreme pain and suffering/fatality of the humans. The male humans, in order to be accepted and survive on the planet they now call home, have to internally carry the babies of the aliens, and not all humans survive this “pregnancy.” Human history has seen a similar instance where one civilization was subject to the will of another. Between the 1890’s and 1900’s, King Leopold infiltrated the Congo, and the

Congolese were subjected to his vicious rule. In the text *The Rings of Saturn*, author, W. G. Sebald, writes, “In some parts of the Congo, the indigenous people were all but eradicated by forced labour, and those who were taken there from other parts of Africa or from overseas died in droves of dysentery, malaria, smallpox, beriberi, jaundice, starvation. and physical exhaustion” (119). Both of these examples depicts how contact between civilizations results in one civilization becoming the ruler of the other. Instead of coming in peace, it seems highly more likely that extraterrestrials would invade Earth, take resources, and subject the natives to be slaves to their will. History remains to be superb evidence of what might be expected to happen if interspecies contact should occur. Seeing as how instances such as one species reigning over another has continually occurred throughout human history, the likelihood of it happening if another species were to come into contact with humans is high.

Though the examples aforementioned show that first contact between two civilizations could prove disastrous for one of the species, one could argue that, though history has shown this assertion to be true, all of the civilizations survived. The goal of life is to survive, and that is where humans get evolution from. So, if humans are still alive and walking around, then they are doing what they are meant to do: survive. However, at what cost are they surviving? The article "The Columbian Exchange: A History Of Disease, Food, And Ideas" states that “Although we may never know the exact magnitudes of the depopulation, it is estimated that upwards of 80–95 percent of the Native American population was decimated within the first 100–150 years following 1492” (Nunn and Qian 165). Just like the Native Americans, the Congolese population was decimated. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald writes about the Congolese saying, “Every year from 1890 to 1900, an estimated five hundred thousand of these nameless victims, nowhere mentioned in the annual reports, lost their lives” (119). So, many humans didn’t survive. In fact,

entire gene pools were nearly wiped out, and evolution calls for diversity in the gene pool in order for favorable traits to be passed along.

In conclusion, from what science fiction and history has shown, interspecies contact may be something mankind should avoid. As technology grows, more eyes are turning towards the heavens. These advances mean that humans will one day be able to physically explore the universe, and maybe find a civilization waiting. However, science fiction and human history seem to promise that contact between two species will lead to deadly diseases, decimation by superior technology, and a master/slave relationship between the superior and inferior species. In the end, mankind, or any other civilization in the universe, may be safer keeping their eyes focused towards the ground instead of the heavens.

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