**Lesson 10: The Future of Race and Morality**

**Daddis**

**Intent:** Understand how EC Comics’ science fiction publications illustrated the tensions between ideologically-based censorship and civil rights social activism.

**Scheme:**

1. Reversing Racial Dynamics in American Science Fiction
2. Censorship and “Cultural Containment”
3. Toward An African American Equality?

**WARNO:** How did those conducting US atomic testing define the term “wasteland”?

***Review***

* Eisenhower’s declared policy towards space would be one of “space for peace”
* yet the comics of the 1950 portrayed battles in space and competition for control of the moon
* comics made after the 1957 launch of Sputnik reflected an American desire for control of space and superiority over the Soviets
* while space would still be used as an extension of the Cold War, the nations could be allies in space and put their rivalry aside when they encountered an alien threat to mankind
* in the years leading up to 1957, space was seen as a future battleground
* as comic book writers looked into the future, it was assumed that earthly military power and political systems would naturally migrate into the farthest reaches of space
* *Atom-Age Combat*: the editors point out that they will not be “ostriches, and bury our heads in the sands in the face of danger”
* In *Mystery in Space #43*, Yardley is leading a “time-scanner” project called “Operation Nullo” that has eliminated all “processes that led to the atom bomb’s invention”
* the irony of the story is that without atomic bombs to defend themselves, Earth is surrounded by “a host of globes circling the planet resembling the space-satellites launched in 1957”
* Yardley: “Earth cannot endure if we fight among ourselves! If we must wage war – let us join forces – against invaders from other worlds!”
* recurring themes in science fiction stories:
* Use of space as the Cold War battlefield of the future
* Consistently emphasizing the use of weapons and battles in space
* “Space for peace” was outweighed by imagery of weapons, rockets, and satellites used for conflict
* despite the militarization of space in comics, writers tried to show the reader that while warfare was a possibility, it was not the inevitable outcome of space exploration

***Yezbick, “No Sweat!”***

* Opening quotation: “The construction of Black identity and stories about Black people is at once a negotiation, a vocation, and a creative enterprise.” - Stanford W. Carpenter
* *What does Carpenter mean by ‘negotiation’?*
* In “Judgment Day!” a responsible, handsome, and somewhat tragic African American role model is neither stereotyped nor caricatured according to traditional codes of comics art
* Tarlton is welcomed as a respected authority figure—an inspector, teacher, and judge who serves an almost heraldic role
* EC’s intensely devoted readers wrote enthusiastically to comment on what remained its “strongest statement about racial intolerance”
* Wertham affirmed parents’ worst fears: that comics were rotting brains and turning kids into potential degenerates
* EC Comics came under particularly harsh scrutiny in the spring and summer 1954 during Senator Estes Kefauver’s Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency
* Wertham’s “smoothly written, alarmist, often smarmy book” led to a new phase of self- censorship in the American comic book industry
* Wertham subscribed to theories on the implicit dangers of popular media to the masses, who were supposedly “far more susceptible to such mechanical deception than the educated classes”
* *Now 1/3 of the way into the course, what do we make of arguments about how media can affect “the masses”?*
* *Why the distinction here between ‘the masses’ and the ‘educated classes’?*
* Wertham was all too familiar with the dubious role censorship could play in “modern brutishness” and had lobbied mostly for age- based restrictions
* Yet Comics Code of 1954 became “a rigorously conservative political manifesto” that “made no concessions whatsoever to the age of comics readers”
* Two years after its celebrated publication in ­*Weird Fantasy*, post-Wertham, post-Senate hearing, and post-CMAA, “Judgment Day!” was rejected on grounds that it violated “the code’s prohibition against ridicule or attack on any racial group”
* *What does this tell us about the political nature of the comics code?*
* *How did this case illustrate racially motivated censorship of popular entertainment in the middle 1950s?*
* Gaines threatened to tell the public that the comic- book industry is a racist authority that will not permit black people to have equal depiction” in their medium
* The CMAA used the Comics Code to assist in “an agenda of cultural containment” that would promote and reify strictly conservative norms while suppressing a “menacing youth culture that violated and mocked traditional values”
* *What do make of the term “cultural containment”?*
* Head of CMAA Charles Murphy likely was consciously promoting sources of traditional values against the role comic books played in the “commercialization of [adolescent] peer culture”
* *Who then is determining what values were “American” in this debate?*
* The use of a “science fiction allegory about race,” segregation, and equal rights at a time when such concerns were still fairly discomforting in mainstream American discourse
* Paul Lopes: the crusade against comic books was linked to a Cold War hysteria that generated fears of a morally, socially, and politically vulnerable America threatened by oppositional voices and deviant culture
* *How were Cold War Americans defining the term ‘deviant’?*
* *Through mostly a communist lens? A racial one? A gendered one?*
* Gaines produced comic books that aligned themselves with kids and teenagers against oppressive authorities, good manners, wholesome attitudes, and false ideals
* Unlike most postwar publishers, EC also “dared to get political” with “stories about lynch mobs, racists, and small- town cops who frame innocents”
* *Once more, how do we know if children were just reading these comics for entertainment or if they were being swayed by EC’s political messaging?*
* EC comics never enjoyed the enormous popularity of more mainstream publishers like Dell
* EC became one of the few voices to present openly subversive morality plays that questioned concepts of liberty, equality, faith, and justice despite frequently pandering “to male adolescent fantasies and daydreams”
* EC stories like Krigstein’s “Master Race” and Harvey Kurtzman’s “Corpse on the Imjin” focused on how political and racial “others” are needlessly abused and murdered out of sociopolitical allegiance to a supposedly higher cause
* EC’s science fiction titles, however, were particularly “willing to make moral statements about bigotry, prejudice, and racial inequality”
* *Why might this be the case?*
* With the exception of the opening “splash panel” depicting Tarlton’s arrival in “Cybrinia,” each frame of “Judgment Day!” is utterly orderly in its size and shape
* Orlando’s subtle positioning of Tarlton’s body evinces the character’s influence, as well as his amiability and patience
* He is rarely depicted in passive poses, and his ironically white- gloved hands continually move to acknowledge, direct, or instruct his companions
* In every case, either Tarlton is concerned about the cultural repercussions of a particular Cybrinian “advance” or he lectures his hosts on the limitations of their bigoted perspective
* He is an utterly innocuous Black man of the future, for whom the usual daily struggle of prejudice and preconceptions has been somewhat reversed
* It is impossible not to notice how blue, orange, and human seem crunched together in an extended braid of metaphoric sameness, unity, and equality
* *Is this a tale of hope or one in which American racism ripples out across time and space?*
* Nama argues the spacesuit, “one of the most iconic symbols of SF cinema,” has been employed as a tool of “racial stigmatization”
* As a “second skin” that allows the wearer to survive in the vacuous cosmos, it also functions as a traditionally white “symbol/signifier” that conjures themes of “antiseptic, hyperrational, and chaste morality” rooted in the Caucasian dominance of space exploration
* *How did Tarlton’s spacesuit in the story mask social codes?*
* In radio, TV, or cinema up to 1955, few fantasies were as specifically accusatory concerning segregation
* Science fiction of the time was largely rooted in the “political gamesmanship” of Red Scare allegories
* From 1900 to 1960, African American characters were decidedly stereotyped as ignorant, savage, servile, or grotesque
* Most of their creators knew nothing about their black subjects
* Wertham especially despised the racist, imperialistic, and pornographic images littered through-out the jungle comics and their space- opera derivatives
* He was, by all accounts, a “liberal progressive concerned about the poor and disadvantaged,” with a particularly commendable record with regard to race
* *What does this suggest about how race and ideology can intertwine to actually undermine social activism?*
* *All Negro Comics* might have achieved great goals, but like “Judgment Day!” the material was suppressed, and “external forces made the first issue a one- shot”
* In *Is this Tomorrow?*, to initiate a race riot that leaves the majority of an unnamed American city ablaze and leads to an industry-crippling general strike, a beautiful, white Red agent is ordered to “start something with those two negroes” at an amusement park
* In a frightening parallel to the Emmett Till lynching, the woman turns toward two well- dressed Black men who are quietly engaged in a carnival game and shouts, “That man insulted me!”
* Two panels later, the city has burned for four days, and the riot has spread across the country
* On the cover and throughout the text, no Black character ever rises up or resists the onslaught of the mindless white oppressors—though plenty of African Americans are depicted as victims
* *Why could Black characters not rise up in this story?*
* *Is This Tomorrow?* is not so different from “Judgment Day!” as we might wish
* Both were designed as racial polemics by and primarily for a white readership
* Both stories depict exaggerated future worlds where racial prejudice and widespread segregation retard the progress of democracy while assisting and sustaining its industrial and imperialist systems of control and exploitation
* Both also offer sympathetic and respectable portrayals of non-Anglo protagonists, both Black and blue.

***“The Million Year Picnic”***

* This is the final story in Ray Bradbury’s short story collection, *The Martian Chronicles*
* Throughout the collection, people have moved away from Earth to begin anew on Mars
* Some attempts have been more successful than others, and at the end of this story we do not know how the Minnesota family will bode on Mars
* The father has lofty hopes for starting a new utopia with his boys and his neighbors
* *How does the landscape in the story reflect a high chance of failure?*
* *What do the Martian ruins tell us about societies’ capacity to live together?*
* *Is the father obsessed with rebirth?*
* *Is it possible to begin a new society that is completely isolated from the rest of humankind?*
* *What structural forces have rendered Earth unlivable?*
* *Is this a story of hope or an acknowledgement of humans’ inability to live together?*
* These children, who will be the basis of the society, had no input into the decision to move to Mars
* While Timothy had suspicions that it was more than a fishing trip, he was still not fully aware of what happened
* This final story of the Martian Chronicles shows that continuously colonizing and settling the next frontier is not a sustainable development strategy