

"In a mirror, darkly": Finding Ourselves Reflected in the Aliens of Melville, Lovecraft, Dick, and Butler

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One of the most ubiquitous character types in stories past and present is the alien – not only in science fiction, but in a wide range of works. We see aliens in the myths of antiquity: Gilgamesh's companion, Enkidu, the Tengu of Japan. The Christian Bible features giants and angels and a talking snake; Shakespeare has his fairies and his Caliban. And today, we see them in children's cartoons, in popular TV shows, in eight of the ten highest-earning films of all time¹ – and in some of our most compelling literature as well. We simultaneously fear and hunger for a nonhuman Other. So it behooves us to take a close look at the alien, its forms and its uses in literature, and by examining these aliens, learn a great deal about ourselves.

In this paper I want to look at the alien as "a mirror, darkly" – a clouded reflector of who we are, of what makes us human. But first, let's examine what we mean by this word, "alien."

What we most commonly think of as an alien is, of course, a

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¹ According to the current "All-Time World Box Office" listings on the *Internet Movie Database*.

nonhuman, usually intelligent being from another world. But there are other meanings as well, and I mean to explore some of those. First is the foreigner, a stranger in a strange land. As a German-born, Hawaii-raised Texan who is a permanent resident of Japan, this is the sort of alien I am most familiar with, since I see one in the mirror every morning. These are the only "real" aliens we are likely to meet; in fact we meet them all the time, people who are out of place, confused and confusing, an exotic mixture of wise man and fool. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a rich source of characters of this type. Moving on to the extraterrestrial, what we more commonly think of as "alien," we have the creatures of H.P. Lovecraft's 1931 novella *At the Mountains of Madness*. Then to examine an alien that is not extraterrestrial but home-grown and man-made: the android, the intelligent robot, the artificial almost-human, in the classic android novel, Philip K. Dick's 1968 *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, better known to moviegoers as *Blade Runner*. And finally I want to consider the aliens of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy of the late 1980s, truly alien and yet human enough to be sympathetic and horrifying at the same time, aliens who make us question whether it is better to give up our flawed humanity and join them.

All of these aliens were created by their authors not so much to say something about aliens, but to say something to us about ourselves. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, makes the point that academics who study foreign cultures must be careful to avoid seeing those cultures as nothing more than projections of the scholar's own hopes and fears, saying more about the scholar's own culture than about the culture he is studying.² But

² Said p. 108.

in fiction it is often the point to say more about who *we* are than about who the aliens are, fascinating as those aliens might be. For there is one more type of alien I have not yet mentioned: the alienated human. As Brian Appleyard puts it, aliens are "the real, dreamed, hallucinated or imagined creatures who pour from the abyss to remind us that we can find no home in the world that made us."³ In this sense, a great many of us are aliens, to each other and to ourselves.

Herman Melville was certainly fascinated with aliens, and the most memorable of his fictional aliens is Queequeg. *Moby-Dick* is full of aliens, actually — one could imagine the *Pequod* as a spaceship full of beings from many worlds, stuck with each other and forced to work together to survive in a hostile environment. Indeed, it has inspired a great deal of America's popular culture,⁴ so it should be no surprise that many science-fiction tales have taken their inspiration from this most American of novels.⁵ Here, I want to consider Queequeg, Ishmael, and Fedallah.

Queequeg is a noble alien who, by his actions, teaches Ishmael (and by extension Melville's readers, who for many decades were the young boys that the book was marketed to) what it means to be a man. He starts off a frightful figure, a cannibal with filed teeth and a tattooed face, threatening to kill Ishmael, but the two quickly become the closest of friends. At first, Ishmael sees Queequeg as "a creature in the transition state — neither

³ Appleyard p. 1. Appleyard's book is a fascinating examination of the alien in modern Western culture.

⁴ See Inge for a survey of Melville's impact, primarily through *Moby Dick*.

⁵ For one of many examples, see Hinds.

caterpillar nor butterfly,"⁶ but this feeling of superiority is gradually replaced by a true respect that the cannibal earns effortlessly, simply by being who he is. He displays a cool gentility in nearly all situations, "thrown among people as strange to him as though he were on the planet Jupiter; and yet he seemed entirely at his ease, preserving the utmost serenity...."⁷ Even when he tells the story of his first encounter with a wheelbarrow—in which, offered a wheelbarrow to help carry his sea-chest, he placed the chest in it and lifted them both to his shoulder to carry them—he tells the story with dignity, simply relating interesting information rather than currying favor through self-deprecation. When Ishmael asks him if people laughed at him, Queequeg answers with a parable, telling how a sea captain, visiting his village, mistook a punchbowl of sacred drink for a washbasin, finishing with "Now...what you tink now?—Didn't our people laugh?"⁸ Queequeg's imperfect English fades to insignificance before his rhetorical expertise. As well as being a moment that anyone living in a foreign land can recognize in themselves, it deftly shatters any notion Ishmael might have had that Queequeg is his inferior.

Soon after, on a ferry, Queequeg roughs up a "bumpkin" who had been making fun of him, and when the "greenhorn" falls overboard through his own clumsiness, Queequeg dives in and saves the man's life, risking his own and demonstrating that, while he takes no insult from any man, Queequeg holds no grudges.⁹ This is in stark contrast to a similar scene on a ferry in

⁶ *Moby-Dick* p. 823/Ch. 4. For this paper, I am using the 1983 Library of America edition which combines *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, and *Moby-Dick* into one volume. Therefore, to ease research, I will cite chapters as well as page numbers.

⁷ p. 847/Ch. 10.

⁸ pp. 855-6/Ch. 13.

⁹ pp. 857-9/Ch. 13.

Melville's earlier novel *Redburn*, where the callow narrator childishly overreacts to a tormentor by pointing a gun at him.¹⁰ There are many other examples I could give—suffice it to say that here and elsewhere Queequeg displays all the manly virtues that American culture prizes, showing himself to be the sort of man that Ishmael only wishes he could be. Although C.L.R. James states that Queequeg is no "noble savage" or "ideal figure,"¹¹ his minor flaws serve only to make him more believable, not truly buffoonish. Those who see him as a "savage" end up revising their opinions or are shown to be buffoons themselves.

His only serious defect to a 19th-century American, that he is a heathen, is puzzled over by Ishmael, but when the Quaker Captains Bildad and Peleg say that only Christians may sail with the *Pequod*, Ishmael comes to his friend's defense, saying that Queequeg is a member of "the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world" to which all who worship any god belong—a statement of deistic universalism that convinces the captains with its eloquence even if they may not agree with its theology.¹²

Here, in an epiphany, Ishmael has overcome his last prejudice regarding his new friend, finishing a process of awakening that critic David Bradley describes as moving from "Their Crowd," provincial middle-class Americans, to "Our Crowd," cosmopolitan multicultural whalers.¹³ Ishmael makes the perfect narrator because he can stand in both worlds.

He is also a good narrator because, like many of his readers, he may

¹⁰ *Redburn* p. 18/Ch. 2.

¹¹ James pp. 39-40.

¹² pp. 886-7/Ch. 18.

¹³ Bradley p. 132.

not be an alien, but he is alienated. At the opening of the novel, he ruminates on times of "damp, drizzly November in [his] soul," when he pauses "before coffin warehouses" and must resist the urge to step "into the street, and methodically [knock] people's hats off." He goes to sea as an alternative to shooting himself.¹⁴ He is wounded in his soul. But who isn't? Christianity, Buddhism, and psychoanalysis all have at their cores the assumption that alienation—a disconnection from our own humanity—is part of the human condition. Whether or not alienation is indeed universal, it is certainly common in modern culture. Ishmael's seems acute only because he recognizes it boldly, while most of us try to hide our alienation from ourselves. In this sense, we are the aliens, refusing to seek a way to heal ourselves and become fully human.

Ishmael finds his way to redemption and healing through friendship. In sharing a pipe with his newfound brother/wife/lover/teacher, he says, "I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it."¹⁵ He and Queequeg even become Siamese twins at one point, tied together by the monkey rope so that if Ishmael lets his friend fall, they will perish together.¹⁶ The pair has symbolically merged into one being. And yet when Queequeg finally does die, it is his coffin that saves Ishmael, a final gift to the friend he must leave behind.

In contrast, Ahab, more deeply alienated and refusing any possibility of healing, has as his companion a far more diabolical alien: Fedallah, a

¹⁴ p. 795/Ch. 1.

¹⁵ p. 848/Ch. 10.

¹⁶ p. 1135/Ch. 72.

hissing, "tiger yellow," stereotypically inscrutable Asian, whose men "seemed all steel and whalebone; like five triphammers" as they row a whaleboat like machines.¹⁷ There is nothing human about them — Ahab regards them as no more than tools. Just as Ahab sacrifices his humanity in order to get his vengeance, Fedallah and his men willingly surrender their humanity to become tools, or, as Philip K. Dick says, "instruments, means, rather than ends...the soul...is no longer active."¹⁸ Ahab and Fedallah are the inhuman reflections of Ishmael and Queequeg.

Fedallah may be an alien, but he is no savage, coming as he does from an ancient civilization. As we can see in Melville's earlier novels of the South Seas, this makes Fedallah far worse than Queequeg in his eyes. Christopher Sten is right in claiming that in his youth Melville discovered "other cultures, not as resources to be exploited by Western nations, but as worlds unto themselves, and worthy of preserving,"¹⁹ but Charles Anderson persuasively demonstrates that Melville trusts aliens in inverse proportion to how civilized they are.²⁰ He prefers the unspoiled savage.

Now let's jump ahead eighty years to another story of soul-destroying obsession and the discovery of humanity in an alien heart, H.P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*. Lovecraft was an eccentric collection of contradictions. An author of cheap pulp short stories and novellas of cosmic horror, like Raymond Chandler he birthed a subgenre of his own and explored it through scholastic criticism alongside his sometimes-

¹⁷ pp. 1024-7/Ch. 48.

¹⁸ Dick p. 187 of *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick*.

¹⁹ Sten p. 39.

²⁰ Anderson p. 336.

brilliant stories. He saw the human species and life itself as pointless and tiresome, but was remembered by his large circle of fellow writers and correspondents as a warm, kind friend. He wrote relatively few stories, but possibly more letters than anyone in history, literally tens of thousands in his short life, many of them longer than most of his stories, full of ideas that he happily gave away to other writers. He was an ultraconservative racist who wrote admiringly of Hitler, but married a Ukrainian Jew and eventually became a socialist. Like Melville he was little read in his time, but today his "Mythos" stories of cosmic weirdness are experiencing a minor Renaissance in popularity, both among fans of weird pulp tales and, to a lesser extent, among critics.²¹

*At the Mountains of Madness*²² is the story of a scientific expedition to the interior of the Antarctic, written in the days when the South Pole had not yet been reached, when such an expedition was as difficult and dangerous as a voyage to the Moon today. Typically of Lovecraft, it is written as a letter or journal of one of the scientists, a warning to others not to return to the South Pole.

To briefly summarize, the expedition finds strange, starfish-like creatures buried in millions-year-old ice. The creatures turn out to have been in a state of suspended animation, and when they wake up while being

²¹ There are several biographies of Lovecraft available; S.T. Joshi's is one of the best.

²² Page references come from the 2005 Library of America collection of Lovecraft's stories. That Lovecraft has recently had collections issued by the Library of America and by Penguin Books in their Twentieth-Century Classics line is an indication that this long-ignored author is beginning to be taken more seriously. Incidentally, Lovecraft's novella inspired John W. Campbell's 1938 novel *Who Goes There?* and, by way of Campbell, two movies: Howard Hawks' 1951 *The Thing from Another World* and John Carpenter's 1982 *The Thing* (Vint p. 437).

dissected, they react by killing the humans and sled dogs, performing autopsies of their own, and leaving for the interior. The narrator and a graduate student follow them and discover a staggeringly ancient, ruined city near the South Pole. Observing comic-strip-like carvings on the walls, they are shocked to learn that the city's builders were not human, but creatures like those found in the ice, and that the city is far older than the human species. It appears to be empty, and as they descend deeper, they learn from the alien artwork that these Old Ones came from the stars and built a civilization that lasted millions of years, and created the first life on Earth—indirectly they are the creators of humanity. They also created a slave species called shoggoths, huge "viscous masses" of protoplasm that could form themselves into any shape.²³ Over eons the shoggoths learned how to think and speak, and rebelled against their masters, probably triggering the final downfall of the Old One society in its decadent final years.

Eventually in the depths of the city they find the bodies of the Old Ones, crushed and covered in slime, decapitated by a shoggoth. The narrator writes,

Poor devils! After all, they were not evil things of their kind. They were the men of another age and another order of being. Nature had played a hellish jest on them...and this was their tragic homecoming. ... Scientists to the last—what had they done that we would not have done in their place? God, what intelligence and persistence! ... [W]hatever they had been, they were men!²⁴

²³ p. 541.

²⁴ p. 576.

The scientists barely escape as the shoggoth barrels down the corridor like a subway train, "a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming...."²⁵ The pair return to civilization, keeping the worst of their knowledge a secret in hopes that no one will investigate the city, possibly to unleash the shoggoth menace upon humanity, but a second expedition is soon to depart for the city of the Old Ones.

The Old Ones are men — by which Lovecraft means civilized scientists, curious builders of great cities, artists and explorers. So we see what Lovecraft, an amateur scientist himself, finds admirably "human." And as with Fedallah and his machine-like men, we have a contrasting alien to demonstrate what Lovecraft considers to be inhuman: the Shoggoths, who can only imitate and destroy, who occupy and desecrate a noble city instead of creating their own. Naturally suited to mere slavery, they rebelled and toppled a great and beautiful civilization, replacing it with penguin-haunted ruins. It is easy to see this as Lovecraft's racism rearing its head, as it does so often in his stories. And yet, we can see that his slow turning away from racism has already begun, just as he slowly goes from referring to the Old Ones as animals, to "inhuman," then "unhuman," and finally "men."²⁶ The Old Ones stand for those human characteristics he cherishes, the same ones he sees in his beloved white New England. But they are certainly not white, Aryan New Englanders. In fiction, he is capable of seeing beyond surfaces to the noble heart we share even with those who look very different. It seems to take him longer to do so in the real world,

²⁵ p. 581.

²⁶ *The Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*, Joshi's footnote p. 240.

but he does make some progress before his death.²⁷

Although, as Mark Lowell puts it, Lovecraft's stories "contain a perversion of what Joseph Campbell called the mythic cycle," rewarding the heroic explorer with nothing but "sorrow, insanity, and death" and "the truth of humanity's insignificance in the universe,"²⁸ this one is nevertheless a celebration of those qualities of humanity that Lovecraft prized, intellectual bravery foremost. Does it matter that this humanity is not always borne by human bodies? It exists in myriad species of aliens throughout the universe, and is thus immortal.

Like Melville and Lovecraft, Philip K. Dick's many books were largely ignored in his time, but today he is widely considered one of the grandmasters of literary science fiction. Like Lovecraft he wrote pulp, and like most of Melville's early novels, Dick's stories were written for mass consumption, but feature flashes of brilliance so bright as to make the often uneven quality of his work forgivable. He used science fiction less because he loved the genre — indeed, he was often critical of it — than because it was the best way for him to explore the questions that mattered to him. One of those questions he returned to time and again is "What does it mean to be human?" or as he put it, "What is it, in our behavior, that we can call specifically human?"²⁹

He explores this question deeply in his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The story is set in the near-future after a nuclear war has

²⁷ Evans p. 110.

²⁸ Lowell p. 48.

²⁹ *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick* p. 187.

nearly destroyed all life on Earth. Most of the healthy survivors have emigrated offworld to Mars and other colonies; those left behind are the poor, the eccentric, and the genetically damaged. These last are not allowed to leave Earth and are referred to with politically correct irony as "specials," who are treated very much as second-class citizens. The elite offworlders are provided with "replicants" or android slaves who, as technology has advanced, are now virtually indistinguishable from humans. Occasionally they kill their owners and flee to Earth, where they are hunted down and "retired" (killed) by bounty hunters like the main character, Rick Deckard. The latest generation of replicants are particularly clever and difficult to detect. Deckard must use a test of empathic response to a series of questions in order to detect the only emotion replicants do not have: empathy for others.

Deckard is a rather petty man, like most people addicted to using a "mood organ" to program emotions into himself rather than feeling them naturally, and mainly concerned with getting enough money to replace his artificial pet sheep with a real animal. The war killed off most animals, and a techno-mystical religion called Mercerism, which encourages its followers to take care of the remaining animals as a way to cultivate empathy, has made killing an animal a horrible crime and turned pet ownership into a big business. Anyone who can't afford to own a real pet will buy a replicant animal secretly, to keep up with the neighbors.

Though Mercerism seems to be the universal religion of those on Earth, most people seem if anything less compassionate than people of today. The most empathic character is John Isidore, a "chicken head," or a special whose intelligence has been damaged by radioactive fallout —

although it is unclear just how much brain damage he has, as he is sometimes more insightful than the "normals" around him. And the replicants are getting better at human emotions. One of them, Pris, convinces Isidore to take her in, while another almost tricks Deckard into killing a fellow human bounty hunter — who is himself tricked into half-believing that he is a replicant. Some replicants, like Rachael Rosen, have implanted memories to make them think they are human; after finding that he has developed a degree of empathy for female replicants, Deckard has sex with her in an attempt to exorcise this demon. He plans to kill her afterwards so as to harden himself against this empathy gone awry, but he finds that he can't do it. The empathy has grown too strong.

But the replicants are incapable of returning this empathy. Pris treats Isidore badly for all his kindness, insulting him for being a special, and when he finds a rare living spider, she tortures and mutilates it before him. He finally helps Deckard in retiring Pris and her companions, but weeps over their deaths nonetheless. For no apparent reason other than spite, Rachael kills Deckard's new pet, a goat, while he is away from home. Deckard and Isidore are both left bereft.

Though the novel calls into question the humanity of all the characters, by the end Dick makes clear that the human characters, for all their faults, are empathic and therefore truly human, while the replicants, at least those of the current generation, are unable to be what he would consider human. However, in an essay he writes, "A human being without the proper empathy or feeling is the same as an android built so as to lack it, either by design or mistake."³⁰ By this he implies that, as torturers,

³⁰ *Shifting Realities* p. 211.

serial killers, and so on can lose the empathic ability³¹, a machine could eventually be built that does have it—and would therefore be human, even if, like Pinocchio, it has an artificial body. This is what we see in Stanley Kubrick's *Blade Runner*, his controversial film adaptation of the book—the replicants in the film are far more sympathetic, and one of them even saves Deckard's life before dying himself. Though they may kill humans, like the slaves in Melville's *Benito Cereno* they are "emotionally and morally human."³² The film's Deckard falls in love with Rachael and runs with her rather than allowing her to be killed. There is also a much stronger indication that the film version of Deckard may very well be a replicant himself without knowing it, something which is hinted at but seems less likely in the novel.

Even the novel does not portray artificial life as being all bad. In the end, Deckard finds a toad in the desert. Thinking he has found the last of a supposedly extinct species, he brings it home to replace his goat, but his depressed wife discovers that it is a replicant toad. This pushes Deckard further into despair, but it gives his wife something to care for, bringing her out of her depression. As Douglas Mackey suggests, "Perhaps the moral of [the novel] is that the inanimate must be integrated with living consciousness. Love even androids, even electric toads. ... [Dick] affirms that we can stop being androids; that we can, by listening to our dreams, become fully human."³³

³¹ He states this clearly in an interview: "I realized that, with the Nazis, what we were essentially dealing with was a defective group mind, a mind so emotionally defective that the word 'human' could not be applied to them" (Sammon p. 16).

³² Lev p. 33.

³³ Mackey pp. 91-2.

Though the story is set in the future, the questions raised by *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* are not entirely abstract. The replicant humans and animals are no longer simply a metaphor like Lovecraft's aliens. Today, especially here in Japan, we are interacting with artificial "life" all the time, and many people find themselves having emotional reactions to it. We grow angry with computer voices on the phone telling us to wait just a little longer; we are saddened when our Tamagotchi dies; we are delighted when our Nintendog thrives. Aibo cheers up lonely retirees. The early generations of the replicants are already here; whether giving our hearts to them proves positive or negative is still open to debate, but the fact that we give our hearts is, according to Dick, proof of our humanity.

Octavia Butler was a rare African-American woman in the largely white-male science-fiction community, and this was only the beginning of her isolation. She was in her youth "a lonely, marginalized figure in almost every possible way: a shy, stammering, unusually tall black girl, a dyslexic, and a lesbian."³⁴ But she made a place for herself as a visionary writer who tackled serious issues and created unforgettable characters "who highlight metaphoric considerations of gender, race, and species,"³⁵ and was the winner of numerous awards. Today her works are the subject of many scholarly papers, and her recent sudden death is still mourned in the community.

Her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, reissued under a single cover as *Lilith's*

³⁴ Sturgis p. 72.

³⁵ Helford p. 260.

Brood, was written in the late 1980s when war between the USA and the USSR still seemed almost inevitable. The first book, *Dawn*, opens with its main character, Lilith Iyapo, in a cell, after having been rescued from the devastation of a nuclear war. Her captors/saviors seem to be torturing her through isolation and confusion, but they are actually trying to prepare her for the knowledge that centuries have passed since the end of the war, that the human species is virtually extinct, and that she is being held by an alien people called the oankali—creatures whose appearance often causes a violent fear reaction in humans. They slowly bring her into their society and groom her for her intended role: to help other rescued humans, currently sleeping in suspended animation, to adjust to their new situation.

And it is a stranger situation than she could imagine at first. The oankali are one of the most truly alien characters imagined in fantastic literature that still have enough in common with humanity that they can be fully developed characters. They very much want to help humans, but they have an instinct, a biological imperative, to mix their genes with those of other species, which they refer to as "trade."³⁶ They have done this for millions of years, and the galaxy is filled with oankali hybrids. And humans are a particularly fine catch, because they have a greater genetic diversity and numerous anomalies, such as cancer, which are valuable to the oankali. However, humans are also supremely dangerous. Like the oankali, they are intelligent, thinking beings, but unlike them, humans are hierarchical—they tend to order their tribal societies into masters and

³⁶ While this may sound absurd to some readers, biologist Joan Slonczewski writes that Butler's novels are "remarkably consistent with with modern molecular biology, even predicting developments that have occurred since the novels were written."

slaves. This, according to the oankali, means that humans are programmed for eventual extinction—if they had not blown themselves up, they would have destroyed themselves some other way. Lilith and other humans deny the inevitability of this, saying that they have free will and can find a way out. The oankali, who can "taste" human genes and know us at a molecular level, and who have experience and memory stretching back millions of years, respond only with stubborn silence. And so, to save us from ourselves, they render us infertile, allowing us to reproduce only through them, so that our children can only be oankali hybrids, genetically modified to remove the hierarchical tendencies, and incidentally covered with writhing, worm-like tendrils and other alien features. As Lilith protests after she becomes pregnant, "But it won't be human. ... It will be a thing. A monster."³⁷ Like her biblical namesake, Lilith is to be mother to a race of aliens.³⁸

Humans, then, have become oankali slaves or pets. Like African slaves in pre-Civil War America, these humans have no rights at all, not even the right to repopulate the Earth. But Butler does not present a simple master-slave narrative, preferring instead, as she always does, to induce an unrelieved dissonance in her readers. As Amy Sturgis writes in a eulogy for Butler, she "didn't merely empathize with the alienated, dominated, and oppressed. She inverted readers' expectations, forcing them to examine their own assumptions and instincts, to perceive how they might identify with and even become the alienator, dominator, and oppressor."³⁹ The

³⁷ p. 247.

³⁸ See Osherow.

³⁹ Sturgis p. 72.

oankali truly do want to help humans, and they seem to know best — although they also make mistakes now and then in their ignorance, calling into question their apparent perfection and the inevitability of human self-destruction. But the humans demonstrate again and again that they are not to be trusted, murdering each other out of jealousy or frustration. The oankali modify the humans' bodies to give them lifespans of hundreds of healthy, youth-filled years, repair their war-damaged world, and bring the humans back to Earth so they can rebuild. Humans who refuse to participate in oankali-human society are allowed to run away and live on their own, but they are still infertile; eventually some return so they can have strange-looking, disturbingly intelligent children, while others refuse to have anything to do with the aliens.

In the second novel, *Adulthood Rites*, one of Lilith's children, Akin, is kidnapped by bandits and sold to a village of resisters. He has not begun growing tentacles yet, so he looks like a normal human toddler, but he is already more intelligent and knowledgeable than the human adults. The oankali leave him in their hands for a year so that he can learn to understand them and become an ambassador of sorts, and he goes native: he takes their side and campaigns to have their reproductive rights and true independence restored. The oankali finally agree to allow a true human society to exist on Mars, where they can do no harm to the oankali-human society on Earth. They do this even though they consider it to be immoral to allow humans to go through another cycle of destruction, but they have been convinced by Akin that not giving humans their freedom is a greater sin. *Imago*, the final book, is a story about another of Lilith's hybrid children, the first truly successful fusion of the two species.

Unlike most of the abovementioned aliens, the oankali do not possess all-good or all-bad human traits. As aliens, Queequeg and the Old Ones are reflections of their authors' admiration for certain aspects of humanity, while Fedallah, the shoggoths, and the replicants of Dick's novel are repositories of their writers' fears. The oankali, like Kubrick's replicants, are more believably complex, merging the positive — empathy and compassion, wisdom and tolerance — with the negative — a patronizing and domineering attitude toward other cultures, a trait which makes them seem at times to be symbols for superpower nations such as the United States.

Thus the oankali are a mirror in which we can see ourselves both dark and bright, but they have something many humans lack: an integrated, unalienated soul. They are not wounded or lost. Even Queequeg is "fearful [that] Christianity, or rather Christians, had unfitted him for ascending the pure and undefiled throne" of his homeland.⁴⁰ They may not be perfect, but the oankali are at home in their slow, living starships, traveling from world to world, trading for genes. We are left, then, with the disturbing idea that the oankali may be superior to humanity, and may thus have the right, even the duty, to treat us like beloved pets, breeding us to improve our health and disposition. They call into question whether "being human" is a such a great thing after all, or whether instead of holding onto our flawed humanity, we should give ourselves over to a superior power so that our children might be better than we are.

⁴⁰ Melville, *Moby-Dick* p. 853/Ch. 12.

At first glance these stories may seem related only by the happenstance of having alien characters, but they are bound together by a powerful thematic thread that runs through them, not aliens but human alienation, and the catastrophe that results from such alienation. The aliens serve as foils and metaphors to bring this alienation and its dangers into focus.

In *Moby Dick*, Ahab's alienation from his humanity leads him to his self-destructive quest for what Starbuck calls "Vengeance on a dumb brute"⁴¹ (967), destroying not only himself but the entire world-in-miniature that is the *Pequod*. *At the Mountains of Madness* can be read as a warning against the hubris of creating and enslaving intelligent beings, an act of alienation itself, which will lead inevitably to rebellion and the fall of even a civilization as ancient as the Old Ones'. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* makes this alienation more clear, as a traumatized human society, claiming to value empathy and life above all, builds intelligent slaves and shallowly competes to have the best pets on the block. That the police need to keep bounty hunters on retainer to hunt down and slaughter escaped slaves demonstrates a deep sickness to which the people are willfully blind, and Kubrick's film makes it more acute by making the androids more sympathetic. Finally, Butler gives us humans who seem to have the seed of self-destruction written into their DNA, inescapable without submitting to the repellent but loving embrace of creatures who will destroy the human species in order to save it.

All these stories are tools that teach us who we are, and warnings that

⁴¹ p. 967/Ch. 36.

if we remain divided against ourselves, we are doomed to destruction.

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