

The Dragon in the Sea Short Guide

The Dragon in the Sea by Frank Herbert

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Characters

In *The Dragon in the Sea* (also published as *Under Pressure* and *21st Century Sub*) the plot focuses on Ensign Ramsey, a psychologist assigned to monitor the crew of a submarine that is on a dangerous mission. Nervous breakdowns among crew members have been attributed to acute paranoia induced by the dangers of underwater warfare and a possibly insane captain.

By making a psychologist the novel's main character, Herbert is able to explore in detail the effects on people of prolonged periods of isolation from normal society. The immense weight of the water of the oceans becomes a metaphor for the pressures on the submariners. The novel's suspense grows intense as Ramsey recognizes psychological problems in himself as well as in his shipmates. He cannot be sure if his observations are accurate or skewed by his own paranoia that there might, indeed, be a saboteur.

Social Concerns/Themes

The combination of careful psychological characterizations, well-planned futuristic technology, and the understanding of the possible effects of an oil shortage has made *The Dragon in the Sea* one of Herbert's most contemporary books. Herbert combines the focus on machines and technology with insights into human behavior of people under stress (hence the variant title *Under Pressure*). Herbert also provides an excellent account of submarine warfare, which has become more imaginable to a general audience in the 1990s than it was in 1956.

In a future earth, oil has become a scarce resource, and the world's population compete to find new oil fields — even those beneath the oceans. Herbert's ability to create plausible situations is revealed in his creation of a futuristic submarine designed to deal with the problems in the seas of his imagined earth. One technological innovation in the novel, a large elastic bag filled with oil and towed by a submarine, was later manufactured in England. In addition, Herbert imagines electronic and sonar devices that would allow for complicated maneuvers in the deepest parts of the ocean.



Key Questions

The *Dragon in the Sea* is a thoughtful novel as well as a tense adventure and should lend itself to discussions of how people behave under emotional stress, how one can tell what is sane from what is insane — especially in one's own behavior and thought — and how technological culture may evolve as the world's resources for sustaining technology disappear. These are tough topics that *The Dragon in the Sea* serves to dramatize, perhaps making them easier to think about.

1. *The Dragon in the Sea* predates the first actual worldwide oil shortage in the early 1970s. How well did Herbert predict the future? Is the kind of technological conflict he depicts in the novel still ahead of us, or is our culture heading in a different direction?
2. The first notable war involving the theft of petroleum did not occur at sea but on land. Before the international war against Iraq in the late 1980s, one of Iraq's complaints about Kuwait was that Kuwait was drilling slantwise under their common border and sucking off petroleum that actually lay under Iraqi territory. This was one of the motivations for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and the international effort to oust Iraq from Kuwait may have been inspired in part by fears that Iraq could disrupt world oil supplies, without which much industry would cease production. Are there additional parallels between events in *The Dragon in the Sea* and the war against Iraq? Does Herbert capture any of the thinking and rationalizations that were part of the real-life war? Are more wars involving petroleum supplies likely?
3. Is *The Dragon in the Sea* a cautionary tale? If so, what is Herbert cautioning against? Does he offer any solutions?
4. In a story of people's sanity stretched to the point of breaking, is the ending satisfying? Does it answer the questions that arise during Ensign Ramsey's investigation?
5. How much of the submarine technology in *The Dragon in the Sea* has become reality? How much has yet to be realized? How might Herbert have been able to foresee developments in submarine warfare before they actually occurred?
6. How good is the characterization in *The Dragon in the Sea*? Who are the most fully fleshed out figures? Does their characterization contribute to the novel's themes?

Literary Precedents

Stories of underwater exploration date back to at least the early 1600s.

Most have focused on the discovery of submerged cities or the lost continent of Atlantis. The advent of submarine warfare in World War I inspired realistic tales of beneath-the-seas adventure, and World War II inspired many motion pictures that portrayed daring Americans sneaking into German and Japanese-held waters to wreak havoc on the enemy. Herbert borrows from the underwater melodramas of World War II and from fantasies of futuristic underwater explorations such as Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). In *The Dragon in the Sea*, he tempers his imaginings with the hard-edged tone of typical war submarine stories, and thus creates a more realistic atmosphere. *The Dragon in the Sea* is one of the earliest science fiction novels to emphasize the problems advanced technology would pose for submarines in the future, making it a landmark in the development of serious speculation about submarine warfare in the modern age.



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