

Quest for the Future Short Guide

Quest for the Future by A. E. van Vogt

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Characters

The two best-developed characters in *Quest for the Future* are Peter Caxton and Selanie. Caxton is a paranoid man of the twentieth century; he is "dominant, subjective, self-centered, on the personal level incapable of seeing another point of view." Selanie is his love-interest and looks nineteen-years-old but is actually over four hundredyears-old. He is initially interested in her because she seems to hold the secrets of immortality; later, he sexually desires her. As he grows, he learns to love her unselfishly. She initially treats him with the contempt his selfishness deserves. Her change in attitude is not as well shown as is Caxton's, but her mysterious personality serves well as a symbol for Caxton's goal: immortality.

Social Concerns

According to Quest for the Future's society of time travelers, at least "twenty percent of twentieth century males were paranoid." Paranoid men are selfish, suspicious of the motives of others, and attractive to women who mistake their self-centeredness for strength and clarity of purpose. Many of the world's problems are created by the paranoid males. The social themes of selfish men and a violent society serve as background for the themes of time travel and immortality.

Techniques

The biggest challenge van Vogt faces in *Quest for the Future* is making Caxton's clumsiness and selfishness central to the novel's plot. He meets the challenge by making the mysterious Palace of Immortality in the "fold" in time something that had to be built by a paranoid character. The time travelers who inhabit the Palace do not know who built it and lack the motivation to be the ones who did. They lack ambition because they are contented people.

Only someone with Caxton's single-minded ambition, born out of his selfish desire to reshape the probabilities of time to suit himself, would be motivated to build the Palace of Immortality and thereby guarantee himself eternal life. By focusing on the motivations of his characters, van Vogt not only makes Caxton central to the novel's events and themes, he creates tension that gives his narrative suspense. When the people of the Palace of Immortality resist Caxton's schemes, they unknowingly combat the man who at a future date made their existence possible.

Themes

The events in *Quest for the Future* are unified by the ideas about immortality.

The novel's society of time travelers has given the desirability of immortality much thought and has concluded that immortality is desirable only if people are psychologically well-adjusted and nonviolent. The main character Peter Caxton has a more fundamental view of immortality and pursues it simply because life seems better than death.

The action of the novel is based on two premises. First, that like space, time is finite. It has an identifiable end that limits what time travelers can do.

The second is that time consists of "probabilities" that can be manipulated to create alternate time lines in which unhappy people may be changed to well-adjusted ones. Time includes a "fold" that runs from A.D. 9812 back to 1977. While in this fold, people grow youthful; they may enter a time line in order to age.



Key Questions

Van Vogt seems to constantly search for answers to complex questions about society and individual people. While not alluding to the women's movement of the 1950s and 1960s, one of its principal concerns, what makes some men exploitive of others, is central to *Quest for the Future*. Nothing if not imaginative in his answers to the important questions he asks, van Vogt suggests that men have suffered from a mass insanity — they are paranoid. Their paranoid fear drives them not only to be competitive but to abuse and manipulate others, especially women. He does not let women off the hook: They too often regard the worst of men as strong men rather than the crazies they actually are, thus encouraging the paranoia afflicting men by rewarding bad behavior. Van Vogt's attempt to create a broad psychological answer for the problem of abusive men would be a good place to begin a discussion of *Quest for the Future*. Is van Vogt's idea about paranoid males just psychobabble (has van Vogt, perhaps, been immersed in the culture of California, the home of psychobabble, too long)? Is it valid? Is it necessary? After all, the novel suggests that contented people are not builders. Given the prospect of eternal life, people seem to spend their time relaxing and not achieving.

1. One of the most difficult aspects of the novel to explain is the building of the Palace of Immortality. It requires a paranoid male to build it. Without it, the immortals would be in big trouble.

This suggests that paranoid males are needed, but the book also implies that paranoid males are crazy abusers of others, given more to destruction than construction. Does the novel resolve these contradictions? If so, how?

2. What role do women play in *Quest for the Future*? Are they paranoid? Are they passive? Do they build anything?

Do they destroy anything?

3. How does Peter Caxton represent the paranoid male? Are his motives credible? Is his transformation credible?

4. Caxton wants immortality because life seems better than death. Is he correct? Where do religion and the belief in an afterlife fit into *Quest for the Future*?

5. What do you think of the idea of manipulating the time line (changing history) to make unhappy people happy? What are the ethical implications of this idea? Is unhappiness important to people, perhaps for their inner growth?

6. Who decides who is well adjusted and nonviolent and who is not?

7. Caxton journeys back and forth in time sometimes at breathtaking speed.

How well does van Vogt help readers keep track of where and when Caxton is and where and when he has been?



8. What sort of society would develop among people who can travel back and forth through time, changing events as they saw fit? Would there be conflict among them? Would they become self-indulgent? Would they create rules to govern how people time travel and alter the time line? How would the rules be enforced?

9. Is Selanie a weak person or a strong one?

10. What effect do extremely long lives have on people in the novel?

Literary Precedents

H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) set the standard for time travel stories. Since the publication of *The Time Machine*, authors have sought to define the problems that would be associated with time travel. For instance, there are the time "paradoxes," such as how could a character be born if he goes back in time and murders his grandmother before his mother is conceived — if he is not born then his mother is born and then he is born even though he cannot be born. Van Vogt answers this with multiple time lines that allow a character to be born in one line and his grandmother to be murdered in another. Another important "paradox" is the problem of how a character can travel back in time and exist simultaneously with himself. In *Quest for the Future*, such a character merges with himself, eventually becoming a composite of various versions of himself.

Related Titles

Time travel is an important theme in much of van Vogt's fiction. In *The Battle of Forever* (1971) another one of his supermen characters uses time to combat his enemies. In *the Weapon Shops of Isher* (1951), the shops are products of time travelers.

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