Slan Short Guide

Slan by A. E. van Vogt

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Van Vogt had an extraordinary imagination that made his fiction inventive and surprising, and his imaginary worlds were unified with well-worked-out themes that focused on fundamental aspects of the human condition. He influenced the direction science fiction has taken—and influenced such notable authors as Philip K. Dick and Larry Niven.

In the case of Slan, van Vogt penned one of the great teen-exploitation novels, or in other words, a novel that plays on adolescent feelings of loneliness and unreasoned anger, as well as the desire to be someone special, and also examines the conflicting desires to be grownup and to remain childlike. The term "teen-exploitation novel" is usually used disparagingly to label shallow works that manipulate teenagers in order to attract a teenaged audience. Yet, some teen-exploitation novels rise above being merely exploitive and present teenaged desires in ways that enhance young readers' understanding of themselves or in ways that encourage teenagers to think.

Slan encourages thought. Main character Jommy Cross's adventures include some significant speculations on human evolutionary history and on what evolution may promise for humanity. Considered one of the best fictional examinations of human evolution ever written, the novel encourages thinking about biological sciences, as well as about people's ability to cope with fundamental changes in their biology.

The novel qualifies as a teen-exploitation novel because Jommy Cross is a blend of many of the anxieties that adolescents experience. For example, he is alone for much of the novel, isolated from society because society does not understand him. He is a supergenius capable of quickly figuring out complex technologies and putting them to use, and he is telepathic, both qualities making him special. People are mean to him wherever he goes, and he seems to be alone against the world. Circumstances have made him a very angry young man. Even so, he determinedly struggles to save the world, even though the people of the world do not understand him. In this he is the precedent for countless teenaged heroes such as those found in comic books like the X-Men, mutant humans who strive to help an oppressive humanity.

About the Author

Along with Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov, A. E. van Vogt has long been regarded as one of the three pre-eminent writers in science fiction's "Golden Age" of the 1930s and 1940s. Although after the 1960s he expanded the range of his fiction beyond that of the 1940s, his stature as one of modern science fiction's "fathers" has continued to increase among many science fiction fans. His writings have attained world stature and have been translated into several languages; in France, his writings are especially popular, sometimes outselling those of even the most popular French authors. However, this popular esteem has not been echoed by all critics.

Born on a farm near Winnipeg, Canada, on April 26, 1912, Alfred Elton van Vogt spent his childhood in rural Manitoba and Saskatchewan. As an adolescent, he was shy, withdrawn, and an avid reader of hundreds of books per year. Unable to attend college because of his family's poverty, at age nineteen he took a job as a clerk for Canada's census department. He began his writing career by selling "confession" stories to True Story Magazine in 1932. Although the fees from the sales of his stories were a significant addition to his clerk's income of a little more than one thousand dollars annually, he tired of writing "confessions" and turned to writing radio plays instead, earning about six hundred dollars for fifty of these. By the mid 1930s, van Vogt seemed destined for a career in government service or as a sales representative in private business; writing was neither interesting nor profitable for him.

When a youngster, he had been an avid reader of Amazing Stories, a science fiction magazine, but had lost interest as he became older. In 1938, perhaps remembering his old pleasure in reading it, he picked up a copy of Astounding Stories, then the preeminent science fiction magazine. In it was "Who Goes There," by Don A. Stuart, a pen name for the magazine's editor, John W. Campbell, Jr. This story still ranks as one of the best in the science fiction genre and formed the basis for the motion pictures The Thing from Another World—produced by Howard Hawks in 1951 and itself a landmark in science fiction film making—and The Thing, directed by John Carpenter in 1984. The story's idea of changing one's appearance in order to pass safely in a hostile society caught van Vogt's imagination; it has since become an important theme in his fiction. Inspired, van Vogt wrote "The Vault of the Beast," which was accepted by John Campbell for publication, appearing in the August, 1940, issue of Astounding Science-Fiction (the new title of Astounding Stories) after some of van Vogt's other stories had been published.

His first published science fiction story was the "Black Destroyer," which was printed in the Astounding Stories' July, 1939, issue. This was followed by a flood of stories that created a sensation among the magazine's readers; in the 1940s, van Vogt's popularity rivaled that of Robert Heinlein, that era's most popular author of science fiction. By the 1950s, van Vogt had produced dozens of stories and seven novels and was a full-fledged success. Even so, he decided to give up writing—believing that his popularity was soon to ebb.

In 1944, he left government service and moved to California. In 1950, he accepted L. Ron Hubbard's appointment to the directorship of the California branch of the Dianetic Research Foundation. This job ended in 1951 when the national organization could not pay its debts. Convinced of the validity of Hubbard's idea that subconscious negative memories are the sources of anxiety and illness and that by recalling these memories and then "erasing" them people can overcome fears and inhibitions, van Vogt remained California's chief auditor— a person who helps people work through their memories— only distancing himself from Hubbard in 1960 when the latter made Dianetics part of a religion, Scientology.

Van Vogt then became a full-time author and by 1970 had returned to his popularity of old. After an extraordinary life of rising above circumstances to become one of the world's most popular authors, van Vogt passed away in 2000.

His life included many honors. In 1946, van Vogt and his wife, author E. Mayne Hull, were the guests of honor at the fourth World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles. A sign of his international popularity was his selection as guest of honor at the 1978 European Science Fiction Convention. In 1968, he received the Ann Radcliffe Award from the Count Dracula Society, and in 1979, he received the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films Award. In the late 1960s, the Science Fiction Writers of America voted van Vogt's "The Weapon Shop" (1942) one of the best science fiction short stories ever written, and as a consequence it was included in the first volume of The Science Fiction Hall of Fame (1970).

Characters

Readers often complain that van Vogt's characters are poorly developed. For instance, in Slan the ruthless Joanna Hillory shifts from being Jommy Cross's implacably murderous enemy to wanting to be his wife, because, she says, he brought her hope by showing concern for the welfare of human beings. This shift of character is not credible, although it serves as a contrast late in Slan to Jommy Cross's change into a calculatedly ruthless manipulator of people.

Ideas dominate the narrative of Slan, and it is not surprising that characters seem under-developed and poorly motivated. Some like Joanna Hillory shift personalities as the requirements of the plot dictate. Her change of faith enables Jommy Cross to escape certain death. On the other hand, Kier Gray turns out to be a special kind of slan who is actually working for a better future primarily to give Slan a happy ending. That in Slan's imaginative world humanity is too stupid to know and to work for its own good cannot excuse Kier Gray's reign of terror and his brutal treatment of his daughter.

Thus his happy ending is unsatisfying.

Other characters, such as the lecherous councilor Jem Lorry and the pathologically greedy Granny are stereotypes that could have been lifted out of Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist (18371839); they are stick figures that serve the needs of the plot.

Van Vogt devotes special attention to only two characters: Jommy Cross and Kathleen Layton. Cross views society from the outside. He is a renegade.

Layton views society from the inside.

She is Kier Gray's special slan who is preserved for study by ordinary humans. Both characters are outsiders; Layton is as intellectually and spiritually apart from the people she lives among as the hunted Cross. Both she and Cross live in fear. He fears discovery and death. She fears persecution, sexual abuse, and murder. Both characters are kinds of supermen endowed with special powers that set them apart from ordinary human beings. These two point-of-view characters see that from inside and outside, human civilization is a failure. Exactly why it is a failure is uncertain, although the reason may be inherent in human nature.

Cross is an impressive creation. His growth from Granny's thief to self-assured adulthood seems to parallel that of Oliver Twist in Dickens's novel, but he grows into a unique creation, embodying many of the contradictions and compromises of a well-drawn character. Strong, intelligent, and determined, he remains vulnerable to love; this vulnerability makes him a sympathetic character and prevents him from becoming too remote from readers. His successes and failures are credible because van Vogt has carefully shown his growth from one event to the next. The idealistic child becomes the cynical man; the early idealism makes his joyful response to Kathleen Layton as believable as his cold-blooded response to her father and the cruel reality of slans.

Layton, on the other hand, retains her innocence. Her upbringing is detailed enough to make her compassionate nature believable in spite of her harsh surroundings. She embodies the notion that the slan are an evolutionary step beyond homo sapiens — that they resulted from a broad biological change wrought by nature in humanity. As Kier Gray puts it, the slans were the result of "the web of biological forces [that] struck everywhere across the Earth." Jommy Cross represents the idea that character "is a matter of training." These two ideas conflict, which may be why Cross's response to the revelations of Kier Gray is revealed, but Kathleen Layton's is not. Environment in the person of Cross seems to triumph over biology in the person of Layton.

Setting

In the time before Slan begins, there was a world war that destroyed civilization around the world, leaving humanity in mis ery. Out of the destruction arose a new dictatorial government that revived old technologies. In Jommy Cross's time, the thirtysixth century, humanity has colonized the moon and is poised to travel to other worlds.

In spite of technological advances, most of humanity lives in an unpleasant society, stuffed into cramped living quarters. This makes the society of Slan a dystopia, or a society that represents some of the worst aspects of human experience.

The government's biggest challenge has arisen during the events chronicled in Slan.

A new species of human has developed, seemingly everywhere at once. Calledslans, these people have odd tendrils on their heads and are telepathic. Fearing them, people have killed them, and the government's secret police hunt them down in order to exterminate them. This has forced slans such as Jommy to hide and to try to disguise their tendrils. Van Vogt presented the slans as an evolutionary leap, and their depiction is remarkably sophisticated and still seems modern and up-to-date several decades later.

A modern school of thought among scientists is that evolution does not necessarily advance gradually but makes leaps, perhaps compelled by changes in environment.

In Slan, the changes may have been compelled by the overcrowding of humanity and by the numerous miseries brought on by the last world war. These ideas may be why van Vogt showed slans appearing throughout the human population: Humanity as a whole is making an evolutionary leap. On the surface, this may seem unlikely, but there is a school of thought among paleoanthropologists (people who study ancient humans) that modern human beings arose almost simultaneously out of disparate populations of Homo erectus, the species thought to be the immediate ancestor of modern humans. Van Vogt's depiction of the evolutionary events in Slan has yet to be surpassed, and his notion of how evolutionary change might work was enriched by his presentation of tendrilless slans— people who cannot be immediately recognized as slans and who therefore are more likely to escape detection than tendrilled slans. It is natural selection at work, ruthlessly changing the human species into something that can survive in a hostile environment.

Social Concerns

Van Vogt's fiction nearly always criticizes society to some degree. What sets him apart from most social critics is that he does not merely focus on current American society but instead analyzes Western Civilization as a whole and sometimes the "human condition" in its broadest sense. In Slan, his first and most famous novel, some of the principal social themes of van Vogt's career are brought forward, although they are sketchy and confused.

The situation of Slan seems borrowed from the events of World War II, during which the novel was written. The "slans" — millions of mutated humans who are telepathic — are systematically hunted down and murdered by the agents of a worldwide police state.

The persecution of the slans is similar to the persecution of European Jews by Nazi Germany, and the secret police resemble those of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The world government itself is led by a ruthless Hitlerlike dictator, Kier Gray, and the government's structure resembles that of the Soviet Union, including a chief governing board that operates like the Politburo. The Nazis blamed the Jews for Germany's military disaster in World War I, and so too the slans are accused of creating "a wave of terror that swept the world into war." In addition, the slans — because they are mutations — are rumored to mutilate human babies in order to make more slans.

These elaborate parallels to twentieth-century tyrannies and their victims are poorly developed in Slan and in fact are abandoned about three quarters of the way through the novel. Even so, the novel contains many small motifs that will become great ideas in van Vogt's later fiction. The protagonist Jommy Cross develops "a deep philosophical sense of the profound tragedy of life." The mysterious tendrilless slan Joanna Hillory asserts, "A normal life must include marriage." In his diary, the great scientist Samuel Lann asserts, "Morality, after all, is a matter of training." When Kier Gray explains how the cataclysm of the last worldwide war came about, he claims it was "a reaction to the countless intolerable pressures that were driving men mad, because neither their minds nor their bodies were capable of withstanding modern civilization." In Slan van Vogt touches on issues such as the inherent tragedy of human life, the difficulty of defining a "normal life," the effect of environment on morality, and the insanity fostered by Western Civilization.

In this early novel, however, these ideas lack a coherent philosophical framework, and they therefore remain undeveloped. By the time he writes The World of Null-A (1948; rev. 1970), van Vogt has found the framework he needs to give his social themes resonance and depth.

Techniques

Van Vogt's plots are always intricate and often confusing. Readers often complain that his transitions from one scene to the next are abrupt and bewildering. For instance, a character at one moment may be looking at a docked spaceship and the next be landing it at some faraway planet — with no explanation of how he got in the spaceship and how he piloted it. Van Vogt explains that such gaps are meant to be filled in by his readers. Such gaps are understandable because of van Vogt's focus on the development of ideas rather than on plot; but the absence of coherent transitions nonetheless shows a lack of consideration for the reader.

Perhaps the awkward and sometimes nonexistent transitions stem from van Vogt's adherence to a pattern of plot development propagated by John W. Gallishaw in Only Two Ways to Write a Short Story (1912). The pattern consists of scenes of about 800 words each.

Within each scene are five steps: First, establish the setting. Second, establish the purpose of the scene's principal character. Third, present the character's struggle to achieve his purpose.

Fourth, show the success or failure of the character. Fifth, show that the character faces even worse problems. To this day, van Vogt professes to follow this pattern in his fiction. So mechanical is this approach to writing a narrative that it may well create abrupt breaks between one 800-word scene and the next.

The techniques that van Vogt employs in Slan to hold the interest of the reader are commonplace. The novel portrays a violent and menacing world in which characters are in constant danger; this creates suspense. The violence is both calculated and capricious. Readers can observe the menacing plans of villains developing toward a dangerous future, thus creating anticipation of excitement to come. Furthermore, violence sometimes explodes without warning and sometimes without reason, lending excitement to every scene because of the potential for dramatic surprises. The menacing plans and violent acts take many forms. For instance, the head of the secret police John Petty plans for most of the novel to murder Kathleen Layton. Her struggle to thwart his efforts make all of her scenes suspenseful. In addition, sex is added to the complicated intrigues.

Jem Lorry, whose good heart has been twisted by the cruel politics of a police state, schemes to make Layton one of his mistresses. In order to evade him, she may fall into Petty's clutches, but to evade Petty may require Lorry's help. Sex is a tease in Slan but is worked believably into the plot. The random violence is less credible because it seems more appropriate to the twentieth century than the thirty-sixth century; it uses bullets and bombs instead of more advanced technology.

The technique that has assured Slan lasting popularity among young adult readers is its focus on an alienated teen-ager. Jommy Cross is goodhearted but misunderstood. He is

isolated and an outcast. Such unhappy feelings are often shared by young people who find themselves growing into an adult world with which they are not yet fully prepared to cope. In addition, Cross has super powers: He can read minds; he can out-think ordinary people; and he is physically stronger and more agile than nonslans. His basic nobility in the face of persecution makes him an attractive protagonist. The shy and unhappy teen-ager is wiser than those who misunderstand him and able to outwit and outfight a society that persecutes him.

Themes

Slan focuses on two main themes.

The first is the question of what makes a person fully human. The second is the problem of truth in a world in which there is far more that is knowable than any single person could ever know. These are important questions.

One of the qualities that makes van Vogt's work stand out from most popular fiction is its working out challenging ideas in detail. This careful thinking through of complicated ideas unifies van Vogt's novels and gives his elaborate plots meaning beyond simple entertainment. This same working out of ideas has sometimes infuriated critics who disagree with them, as well as befuddling others who do not understand them.

When examining Slan's theme of what makes a person fully human, one can readily see why van Vogt's fiction is controversial and capable of arousing fierce passions in readers. Critics have failed to recognize that Slan is a part of the "Modernist" literary movement that has dominated the "serious" fiction of the twentieth century. Among Modernism's most significant traits are its depiction of alienation, loss, and despair, and its rejection of history and traditional values. From Slan's beginning, its protagonist Jommy Cross, a nine-year-old slan, suffers the loss of loved ones — his mother is murdered by the secret police, just as his father had been. For survival, he becomes a thief. Despair tempers him; every disillusionment and every loss of a loved one hardens him. He discovers that to be human is to fear what one does not understand and to be a pawn that is easily manipulated by propaganda. The slans are supposed to be the next evolutionary step after homo sapiens. They are supposed to be "by nature antiwar, antimurder, antiviolence." Even so, the slans' response to the problems of humanity is coldly calculated; they willingly sacrifice the lives of millions of slans and homo sapiens in order to secure their own future — a future that offers a more efficient law and order than the past, because the slans' superior brains are more efficient than those of homo sapiens.

The problem of truth in a dishonest world is less disturbing than the notion that people are inherently cruel and selfish. Even so, van Vogt's handling of the theme of truth suggests that people prefer ignorance that supports simple prejudice rather than the research and thinking that lead to compassion and understanding. The story of Jommy Cross is one of a search for truth. He discovers several different versions of the history of relations between homo sapiens, "true" slan, and tendrilless slan. The absolute truth of history eludes him. In his young imagination, he views true slans, like himself, as embodiments of such traditional values as honesty, courage, selflessness, and honor. When these hopeful views are proven false, he focuses on himself as his one truth; he is the one slan who can save the world from a disastrous conflict. Even this proves false. In Slan, truth is elusive. It is glimpsed but never understood.

Topics for Discussion

1. Is the development of Jommy Cross's character fully depicted? Is anything missing? Is the person he becomes as attractive as the person he was at the novel's beginning?

2. Was van Vogt making any moral judgments when Cross's attitudes change?

3. Biological evolution is an inescapable theme in Slan. Does evolution show up in a small scale; do any individual characters evolve physically or in their personalities?

4. In what ways does Slan comment on twentieth-century society? Is its depiction of tyranny believable? What points did van Vogt make about modern social conflicts, such as racism?

5. Joanna Hillory asserts, "A normal life must include marriage." Must it? What does this remark tell us about Joanna Hillory? How might other characters in the novel regard her assertion?

6. Scientist Samuel Lann asserts, "Morality, after all, is a matter of training." Is it? Does Slan show this? Does this account for Cross's development throughout the novel?

7. Kier Gray claims that the last worldwide war came about as "a reaction to the countless intolerable pressures that were driving men mad, because neither their minds nor their bodies were capable of withstanding modern civilization." This sounds likefuture shock, a term coined about thirty years after Slan was published. Does Slan anticipate modern social issues? Does modern civilization in and of itself drive people insane?

8. Are the slans human beings? Are nonslans right to fear them?

396 Slan 9. Is Slan a novel that was ahead of its time? What modern ideas does it anticipate?

10. What would happen to Homo sapiens if the slans took over the world?

11. Are any of the slans racist?

12. Are slans morally superior to Homosapiens?

13. Would people really react to new humans the way they do in Slan?

14. The oppressive society of Slan is a dystopia, a society in which it would be miserable to live. How does the oppressive nature of the society figure in the evolution of the slans? If the society were a Utopia instead of a dystopia, would the slans still have evolved, or would there be no environmental pressure to evolve?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is future shock? How might it apply to the plot of Slan?

2. What are the different views scientists have of how natural selection might work? Which of these would be represented in Slan?

3. What is the true history of relations between Homo sapiens, "true" slan, and tendrilless slan?

4. What aspects of Slan suggest that it is part of the Modernist literary movement? What aspects of the novel suggest that it is not?

5. Does Slan pander to any of the baser aspects of adolescent mentality?

6. Slan is a book of ideas. What are the scientific and social ideas it presents? Does it do a good job of presenting them?

7. What are the effects of environment and biology in individual human growth and development in Slan? Which is more important to the events in the novel?

8. Did van Vogt develop his notions of evolution coherently in Slan? How do his ideas fit in with modern theories of evolution?

9. Write a story about what happens after the end of the novel. Will anything change? Which human species will win? Or will there be yet another evolutionary leap to someone better adapted to the world than Homo sapiens, "true" slan, and tendrilless slan?

10. How does Slan incorporate real history into its setting and plot?

11. Did van Vogt revise any ideas from Darwinian evolution in Slan? Where did he differ, if at all, from Darwin? Where did he agree?

12. Van Vogt depicted evolution as species-wide leaps; change does not come from an individual mutated being, but from many people at once. New ideas in evolutionary theory of the 1980s and1990s would seem to support the idea of sudden changes in a species, rather than slow accumulation of changes, as part of the mechanism of evolution. What sources might van Vogt have drawn on for his ideas about a species-wide leap for his novel written in the 1940s?

13. In Slan, the mutations that result in slans come amid other mutations that are failures. Is this notion of several mutations being tried all at once in order to cope with environmental change supported by science?

14. What do paleoanthropologists suggestis the relationship between human social evolution and human biological Slan 397 evolution? Are the two related in the

development of intelligence, speech, and bipedalism (walking upright on two feet)? How might this figure in Slan?

Literary Precedents

The idea of mutation was not new when van Vogt wrote Slan, but he transformed the motif into a broader view of the world than before. For instance, in The Island of Dr. Moreau (1896), H. G. Wells portrays animals that were made into grotesque copies of human beings by the experiments of a mad scientist; but these were not truly mutations in the Darwinian sense.

Van Vogt deserves credit for more fully grasping the implications of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection than had earlier writers. In Slan, mutations appear throughout the world in the twenty-first century. Many of the mutations are hideous failures. Many others are the slan, beings who look like humans except for golden tendrils on the backs of their heads. These tendrils enable slans to communicate telepathically. The mutation is an evolutionary leap, not a matter of isolated freaks of nature or the misguided experiments of scientists. Slans are the after-men — the next evolutionary step after homo sapiens. In that sense, Slan is an exploration of how humanity would respond to its own biological evolution. No one before Slan had so fully used biological evolution in fiction. Therefore, Slan is a seminal work: It set the precedent that other writers imitated.

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Related Titles

The ideas in Slan continued to interest van Vogt throughout his career. In The World of Null-A (1948; also published as The World of A) and its sequels The Players of Null-A (1956; also published as The Players of A, The Pawns of Null-A, and The Pawns of A) and Null-A Three (1985), van Vogt explored the social implications of a superior way of thinking. Instead of emphasizing biological evolution as he did in Slan, he emphasized a social evolution brought on by some human beings learning to use their brains better than other human beings are able to.

In van Vogt's view, this superior way of thinking would result in people prepared to logically respond to any situation, no matter how unfamiliar. This is taken to an extreme in the protagonist, who is killed but each time awakens in a new body in a new place, often a different planet. Although his situation is continually unfamiliar, he always acclimates himself quickly. On Venus, where everyone is like him, a military invasion is thwarted by the universal logical response of all the planet's people.

Evolution figures in The Voyage of the Space Beagle (1950; also published as Mission: Interplanetary), The Changeling (1950; also published as The Beast and The Moonbeast), and The Silkie (1969). As its title implies,The Voyage of the Space Beagle is a high adventure that uses Charles Darwin's voyage on the Beagle for inspiration. In The Changeling, there is a mingling of ancient humans and modern ones. The Silkie of The Silkie are advanced beings capable of journeying in space without ships; the fantasy element is emphasized in this book, with a Silkie even journeying outside of the universe to observe it.

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