

# The World of Null-A Short Guide

## The World of Null-A by A. E. van Vogt

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# Characters

Gosseyn carries the burden of The World of Null-A's themes. His name is meant to be pronounced "GoSANE," and he exemplifies the advantages of Null-A thinking. Most of the other characters are essentially stereotypes whose behavior is predictable, although van Vogt succeeds in giving an air of mystery to Patricia Hardie, daughter of Earth's president, and Eldred Crang, leader of a secret base of the Greatest Empire and secret follower of Null-A.

Gosseyn has much in common with Jommy Cross of *Slan* (1946; rev. 1951).

They both are supermen. Gosseyn has extra brain matter that gives him extraordinary powers. Cross and Gosseyn both represent the next evolutionary step after modern man. Like Cross, Gosseyn is an especially attractive character for adolescent readers because he is a lonely figure who is persecuted by evil forces. His lashing out to destroy his enemies is very satisfying as a fulfillment of his vengeance against seemingly undefeatable evil.

On the other hand, it is an unsatisfying climax for a character who is supposed to be able to outsmart his enemies.

The specialness of Gosseyn is established early in the novel. A lie detector informs him that his memories of his life are false. According to the theme that memory creates personality, Gosseyn is nobody, yet he does not panic.

In spite of the realization that he has no idea who he is, he retains his skills acquired by years of Null-A training.

The student of Null-A would seek to reconcile the intellectual and animal parts of his brain. Thus Gosseyn takes "the Null-A pause" then overcomes his animal desire to panic by integrating its energy into his rational view of his situation. Just as Null-A thinkers are supposed to do, he takes logical steps to protect himself and to discover who he is. When he is murdered, a duplicate of himself awakens with his memories and personality. Again, the new Gosseyn accepts the unique situation for what it is and takes logical steps to discover what is happening. In the process, he educates his brain's extra matter, which turns out to be a biological mediator between the animal and intellectual parts of his brain. Thus Gosseyn is adroitly worked into The World of Null-A's themes of Null-A philosophy and of memory. His extra brain matter represents the leap to sanity and true understanding of natural forces that Null-A would mean for the insane society of the twentieth century.



## Social Concerns

The social concerns of *The World of Null-A* are at once sweeping and specific. In it, van Vogt indicts Western Civilization as insane. Before writing the novel, van Vogt had read and absorbed Alfred Korzybski's *Science and Sanity* (1933), which outlined the theory of "general semantics." In brief, Korzybski argues that for thousands of years people have made awful mistakes because they have mistaken imprecise words for precise ideas; their language and thought have conveyed views of an unreal world that has been confused for the real one. For instance, the word stone may be used to describe a multitude of individual rocks, but stone does not convey the idea that each object so described is different from all the others. Language implies that there are stones and not-stones. Korzybski called this a "two-valued doctrine" and associated it with Aristotelianism.

Failing to recognize that, as the character Gosseyn puts it, "no two objects of the universe can be identical" and that what are called stones are in fact each utterly unique has been the source of fuzzy thinking for over two thousand years. Such fuzzy thinking in *The World of Null-A* has resulted in injustice and war.

"Null-A" means non-Aristotelian, as well as non-Newtonian and non-Einsteinian. In *The World of Null-A*, a future Earth is dominated by the Null-A philosophy. Humanity is slowly educating itself toward sanity after centuries of following Aristotle's view of the universe. As an educational film explains to Gosseyn, animals make mistaken associations that may be fatal.

For instance, a coyote fails to distinguish between a man with a camera and one with a gun: "A similarity that did not exist was assumed. The story of the dark ages of the human mind is the story of man's dim comprehension that he was more than an animal, but it is a story told against a background of mass animal actions, rooted in a pattern of narrow animal identifications.

The story of Null-A, on the other hand, is the story of man's fight to train his brain to distinguish between similar yet different object-events in spacetime." A "sane" Null-A person will "adjust instantly to any situation" because it is "the very essence of NullA that no two situations were the same"; a Null-A follower will recognize that a situation is unique and will respond appropriately to that uniqueness. For example, when Null-A Venus is invaded by a huge and well-armed alien army, all the planet's citizens — without any need for communication with each other — take exactly the logically right actions and stymie the invaders.

Twentieth-century American society is by implication insane. "It was the nature of Aristotelian man that he did not share willingly," declares van Vogt.

Modern materialism is an illness; NullA people put little value on objects.



Wishful thinking is also an illness of society; van Vogt asserts, "Countless billions of people had lived and died without ever suspecting that their positivist beliefs had helped to create the disordered brains with which they confronted the realities of their worlds." The Null-A thinker makes no assumptions and has no unrealistic expectations. Indeed, the slogan of Null-A Earth's Semantics Institute is: "The negative judgment is the peak of mentality." That is, expect nothing; accept a situation for what it is.

Korzybski's "general semantics" offers explanations for problems that are central to van Vogt's thinking.

Violence, injustice, and wrong-headedness have interested and puzzled van Vogt from his earliest writings. In this light, his absorption of Korzybski's philosophy seems natural. Existentialist philosophers have found much to admire in van Vogt's fictionalizing of "general semantics." Others have complained that the social themes of *The World of Null-A* are too confusing and too simplistic. Van Vogt himself reveals some ambivalence about his indictment of Aristotelianism. In "Aristotelian fiction," one character observes, "the hero always wins," yet there is never any doubt that heroic Gosseyn will triumph in van Vogt's own novel.

In addition, Null-A rejects absolutes, yet *The World of Null-A* is populated by convenient absolutes, such as lie detectors that are always right, with absolute declarations of the truthfulness of characters' statements.

## Techniques

The plot of *The World of Null-A* is complicated. In order to show the advantages of non-Aristotelian logic, van Vogt places his ultimate Null-A philosopher Gosseyn under extreme stress, including enduring his own horrible murder. Gosseyn is flung from one suspenseful situation to another; the suspense simultaneously forces Gosseyn to use to the utmost his Null-A skills and serves to maintain reader interest. In addition, by putting forth a clear philosophical background for the action of the novel, van Vogt manages to keep his imaginative plot twists clear. Gosseyn's "Null-A pause" not only allows him to put his situation into clear perspective, it allows him to clarify the situation for readers, as well, without long, tedious explanations that would distract one from the plot.

# Themes

Van Vogt's attack on Aristotelianism dominates every part of *The World of Null-A*; its grand vision unifies the novel. Even so, the novel contains several of van Vogt's favorite motifs.

*The World of Null-A* has the unifying philosophy that Slan lacks, but it echoes Slan's concerns with morality, the tragedy of life, and the question of what constitutes a normal life. The followers of Null-A struggle toward an ill-defined moral life, but even Gosseyn learns to kill ruthlessly; he unhesitatingly kills two guards: "The guards were symbols, he decided bleakly, symbols of destruction." By calling the guards symbols, he refutes what they really were — unique men. The moral ambiguity is echoed in van Vogt's tragic vision: People tend to die meaningless deaths, often as unwitting pawns of others.

The idea of a "normal life" is a welldeveloped theme and is focused on the concept of self-identity. In his introduction to the novel's 1970 edition, van Vogt asserts that "no-memory equates with no-self." Selfhood is the accumulation of life's experiences. This concept helps make believable Gosseyn's leaping from one body to another, thus surviving his own murder. So long as the new body has Gosseyn's memory, it is for all intents Gosseyn.

## Key Questions

Van Vogt is usually lumped together with other science fiction writers whose principal interest is to entertain and earn a living writing popular thrillers and romances. Yet, van Vogt may see himself differently. In its exploration of an alternative way to view the world, *The World of Null-A* seems more in the tradition of philosophical fiction typified by writers such as Sartre and Borges than typical science fiction adventures. An examination of van Vogt's career suggests some ambivalence about his role as teacher or entertainer, with works like *The Silkie* (1969) functioning as grand space operas and others like *The World of Null-A* investigating fundamental questions of human existence. If nothing else, *The World of Null-A* invites discussion of the difference between a novel as melodrama and a novel as thought-piece.

Which is it? Can a novel be both a light entertainment and a work that asks detailed and disturbing questions about how we readers actually fit into the universe?

1. Do you find "general semantics" as described by van Vogt attractive? In the novel, what are the main tenets of "general semantics"?
2. How would Aristotelian thought make people insane? How would it make Western Civilization insane? Is the notion of the culture driving people insane a crackpot idea?
3. Does the style, organization, and content of *The World of Null-A* reflect the ideas of general semantics as outlined in the novel? Are there any contradictions?
4. The Null-A thinker makes no assumptions and has no unrealistic expectations. Would our lives be better if we too made no assumptions?
5. Is *The World of Null-A* morally ambiguous?
6. Is the loss of memory equivalent to the loss of self?
7. Does Gosseyn's being superhuman mean that the ideas he represents have no real application to the real lives of ordinary people? Was it a mistake for van Vogt to give him extra brain matter?
8. If people, like those on Venus, react to a situation in exactly the same way, are they just automatons? Are they fully human? Or is individuality a sick Aristotelian concept?
9. What is the point of having Gosseyn die and then awaken in a new body? How does van Vogt use this as a plot device?
10. *The Players of Null-A* and *Null-A Three* are fun to read, too, and discussion groups may wish to add them to their reading list. How do they compare to the original novel? Does *The Players of Null-A* answer any of the questions created by the plot of *The World of Null-A*? Does it tie up any loose ends? Does *Null-A Three* clarify any of the





philosophical ideas of the original novel? Does it offer reflections that may have resulted from van Vogt's having thought about his material for thirty or forty years?

11. What is positivism? Why would Null-A thinkers object to it?

## Literary Precedents

The practice of creating philosophical tales that are meant to teach readers is an ancient one, dating back to the remote past of both East and West. In its point of view, *The World of Null-A* resembles Francis Bacon's Latin tale *New Atlantis* (1627), which depicts a secret civilization that through superior reasoning has outpaced the rest of the world in its social structure and technology, including the development of submarines and airships. Van Vogt's Null-A society on Venus promises social and technological advantages for modern humanity, including the development of antigravity because Null-A thinkers are not bound by the absolute laws of Newtonian and Einsteinian physics. In its narrative, *The World of Null-A* resembles John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678; 1684), which depicts the growth of the spirit of its main character through the stresses of his pilgrimage to the Celestial City.

Gosseyn is on a pilgrimage to an unknown end, and he, too, grows as he endures the stresses of his travels.

## Related Titles

Two sequels to *The World of Null-A* have been published. *The Players of Null-A* appeared in 1956 and is a thrilling adventure story. Published in 1985, *Null-A Three* offers reflections on the Null-A philosophy.



# Copyright Information

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