Analysis Of Alternate History Literature Essay, Research Paper

Is there such a thing as fate? Are all of the events that occurred throughout history inevitable in their outcomes? Of course not. That is the reason why history is studied so extensively, so that we may learn from those past events in order to sculpt our own future. Nonetheless, a prevalent question that has arisen from such studies is that which asks “What if…?” With that, one finds themselves inquiring into the genre of alternate history. In such pieces of literature, the world is viewed as if it had undergone a reasonable change at some point in the past, this being referred to as the point of divergence (from our own timeline). As might be expected, those authors that chance to write such works must contemplate heavily even the smallest details of the events in each story in order to not only make the reader enjoy the work, but believe that such an allohistory is plausible. For in such contemplation lies the quality that marks the literature of this genre, as plausibility must be regarded in even the most fantastic of alternate histories.

The plot behind many alternate histories is extensively linked to the overall plausibility of the piece. This is dependent upon several factors, each of which are in most cases either greatly respected or widely ignored by authors. Foremost, an alternate history must be the result of a reasonable point of divergence. Examples of reasonable events vary from different decisions being made by key individuals of the era to the most far-out influence possible. In no case should point of divergence arise in such a way that it contradicts the sociopolitical and technological progress of the time. In other words, situations involving “super empires” and “rising from the ashes” should be avoided, if it is obviously preposterous. Henceforth, the successful passage of secret orders (that would have otherwise been intercepted) to a Confederate general leading to a Civil War victory for the South (How Few Remain, Turtledove 1998) is equally as plausible as an extraterrestrial invasion of Earth during the Second World War which leads to a suspension of intra-human hostilities to fight a more menacing force (WorldWar series, Turtledove). As aforementioned, the plausibility of an alternate history also tries to stay within the context of the sociopolitical and technological progress of the era. An excellent example of such would be Harry Turtledove’s Great War series, which chronicles the events of World War I as they transpire on a North American continent where the Confederate States battle the United States for the second time since they won the “War of Secession”. In the first of the three books released, technology remains on course with the utilization of machine guns, propeller-mounted aircraft and the automobile, as well as the introduction of new technology like “barrels”, or the American name for the tank (which did in fact make it’s debut in warfare on the side of the British in WWI). The politics of the this particular timeline are also similar to our own, if not amplified by the presence of a large Socialist party in the United States working for progressive changes and revolutionary actions on the part of the oppressed Black population of the CSA. Each of these can be seen to reflect similar (although not so pronounced) events in the normal timeline.

The plot of an alternate history can be observed as being not the story of a single character, but of many. In order to obtain an understanding of the scope of the difference between that history and our own, one has to follow a number of characters. The circumstances of each of these characters may or may not intertwine, but each character in and of themselves serves to represent a specific view of the story. Therefore, in histories centered around a war, you will find characters on both sides of the conflict, at and away from the front, at all the levels and classes of the present societies. Thus a history dealing the Civil War will tell both the tales of Union and Confederate soldiers, but also of their leaders, and those in the background trying to make it through their own ordeals given the present conditions. The general flow of the history is to tell a part of each character’s tale at a time, so as to keep with the chronology of the story as a whole. No single character should take precedent over another, for in doing so the reader’s attention will be drawn away from obtaining an overall understanding of the history.

As has been evident, the setting of most alternate histories occur at times of societal instability. Nothing typifies such conditions more than war. In addition, war is a time in which many people can see drastic change taking place around them, and they thus deem these to serve as excellent points of divergent. That is why a great many alternate histories have their points of divergence as the Civil War or World War II. However, this means that many authors must try hard to come up with different forces to result in the divergence, or else set their stories at times further after the point of divergence. In this case, they can create a setting of instability that is either a foreseen result of the original divergence or another dramatic event that could occur in any history, be it our own or the alternate. A work that uses such a setting for an alternate history can effectively tell the reader of the original divergence point in an introduction or have it slowly revealed to the reader as the characters are developed.

The length of works of alternate history varies from author to author. Those who specialize in the genre tend to write their histories in a number of books, over the course of a series. This gives them sufficient time to build not only their characters, but turn as much attention as possible to the detail of the history. Other authors, mainly those whose works are consistent with other genres, tend to write one-book alternate histories. Often, one will find that these will focus more on the story of a single character, with the point of divergence only adding to the conflict that character is undergoing. This tends to detract from the overall extent of the history, as previously stated.

A recent favorite among the genre is a series called The Oath of Empire by Thomas Harlan. The first book in the series, The Shadow of Ararat, tells the story of the known western world as it exists in the year 600 A.D. The point of divergence is obvious, however, as the Roman Empire still stands, approximately 125 years after its fall in our own timeline. At a first glance, one might say that the history that takes place in this book is not plausible. It goes against those precepts that an alternate history should not be the result of an unreasonable divergence, and the concept of the “enduring empire” is first among them. The fall of Rome was almost inevitable, as corruption and outside influences had begun to erode its stability for years before the eventual barbarian conquest. This book proposes that a few brilliant leaders saved the Empire by combating these forces, and does not go into much detail about it.

Given its shortcomings on that note, the story goes on to develop its characters, of which there are a number. The setting is not one of dramatic instability, however, but of building suspense as Rome readies itself to invade and conquer the only enemy it knows of: the Persian Empire. The understanding of the tactics and strategy of warfare by Harlan is truly amazing, leading to number of well composed battle scenes. These scenes do well to feature characters that can be analogized to our own world. The most striking of these characters is Mohammed, who fights for the Roman province of Palmyra. The story develops him very well as a man who is studious of religions, but in this world he had not had the chance to become the founder of Islam that he is in ours. This is an excellent example of a character that serves to focus the attention of the reader closer to the story and arouse contemplation.

The story evolves nicely with the technological progress of the time, building onto those innovations known by the ancient Romans. There is mention of more advanced technology, such as the printing press, but there is reason given to explain its invention in the urgency to fulfill a script order for the Senate by a merchant. Harlan steers clear of the fabled “Roman steam engine”, a device discussed by the circle of authors in the genre. Even if the Roman Empire survived for another century, it would never have the technology (such as gauges to read pressure) or the need (they used slaves, hence labor was cheap) to have such a device. The political progress of the story mirrors exactly that as it was prior to the fall of the Roman Empire, with two emperors ruling both the East and West Empires. Their dependence upon one another and treachery behind each other’s backs is an excellent display of the diplomacy of the times. The Persian Empire is also firmly under the rule of an emperor, whose power is not lessened by the presence of the new Muslim faith in that the latter doesn’t exist.

However, there is one part to The Shadow of Ararat that works to detract from its worth as an exemplary example of the alternate history genre. Simply put, in this world, magic works. Both the Roman and Persians armies fight each other with not only men, but small legions of magicians that work to both attack and defend their respective sides. More to the point, everyone is aware that such acts of sorcery are possible, and seeing such is not out of the ordinary in the story. Seeing this as we can to be implausible to the highest degree, one might say that it doesn’t belong to the genre at all. However, the magic is more of a background feature than anything else, and in the story there is at least some explanation as to how a few remarkable individuals managed to find and perfect these skills not long ago. Who is to say that Rome’s endurance wasn’t what led to the existence of such people, for skewed timelines affect everyone in the history? Therefore it can be seen this and other “rules” of the genre that Harlan breaches help to support the claim of this book to be a exemplary piece of literature of the alternate history genre. Even an esteemed author of the genre such as Harry Turtledove has begun to incorporate the element of magic into his allohistories, essentially basing whole worlds on them. At first one might see this as combining the genre with that of fantasy, but when you return to observe those sociopolitical and technological themes at work, you know that they are indeed different outcomes of some event.

The literature of the alternate history genre must conform to a certain number of criteria. How the author works to bend these criteria in order to provide the reader with an entertaining look at what might have been is another way that creates an exemplary example of the alternate history genre, the defining characteristic of true literature. Accordingly, The Shadow of Ararat is a capital work of literature, in the broadest sense that it applies to the alternate history genre.