

CANNIBAL MOTHER: STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM,
GENDER COMPLEXITY, AND THE BIRTH/DEMISE OF
ALICE SHELDON IN JAMES TIPTREE JR.

by

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Introduction

“I AM NO DAMNED WOMAN WASTEFUL GOD NOT TO HAVE MADE ME A MAN.”

In one of her school composition notebooks from 1935, Alice (Alli) Sheldon expresses her struggle with her gender identity and sexual orientation, notably identifying an extreme discomfort with her feminine identity. Born in 1915, Sheldon throughout her life became an artist and art critic, a high-ranking member of the United States Army Air Force, and a CIA intelligence officer. She was married to her first husband, William Davey, between 1934 and 1941, and married her second husband, Huntington D. Sheldon, in 1945. By 1967, Sheldon had assumed the masculine penname James Tiptree Jr., under which she wrote letters to Ursula K. Le Guinn, Joanna Russ, and Robert Silverman, and published a variety of speculative science fiction short stories and novels. Informed by her personal life and experiences, Tiptree’s science fiction became Sheldon’s platform to discuss feminist ideology, biological essentialism, the nature of masculinity and femininity, and her theories on sexual and social relationships.¹ In the introduction to a book of his short stories, Silverman refers to Tiptree’s work when he writes, “It has been suggested that Tiptree is female, a theory that I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree’s writing.”² In 1977 it became publicly known that Tiptree was a woman, to the shock of Silverman and many others. This shock reveals the depth of Tiptree’s identity and the extent to which his masculinity informed his writing. This fact necessitates interrogation into the nature of Sheldon/Tiptree’s identity and how gender informed his science

¹ In this project, I will use the pronouns “she/her” in reference to Sheldon, and “he/him” in reference to Tiptree. This is to avoid prescribing a gender identifier on either, while maintaining respect for the historical framework.

² Phillips, “The Double Life of Alice B Sheldon,” (Picador, 2007) 3

fiction so deeply that many were blindsided by his true identity. The analysis and argument developed in this project focuses on the ways in which Alli Sheldon explores through her fiction the theories about gender and sexuality that she developed over the course of her life as seen in her essays, letters, and diaries. These works of science fiction, including “Love is the Plan the Plan is Death,” “The Women Men Don’t See,” and “Houston, Houston, Do You Read,” reveal Sheldon’s complicated, revolutionary, and sometimes conflicting representations of gender and sexuality in our world and in others.

By comparing Tiptree’s published works to the personal writing collected in the archives, I track Tiptree’s theories of gender and sexuality that appear throughout his career. This includes ideas about gender roles (social and biological,) essentialist sexual characteristics, gender subversion, same-sex and opposite-sex attraction, and reproductive behavior. I intend as well to understand why the penname Tiptree was of such importance to both Sheldon and her contemporaries, and what this masculine figure represented for the texts and the theory that emerged from them. Tiptree’s writing has had a major impact in the science fiction community and has been very important for students and fans alike. Alli Sheldon has also been a relevant figure for those studying women’s rights and women writers in the literary canon. My research will expand upon this legacy by defending Tiptree as a queer writer and exploring the gender theory at work in Tiptree’s writing.

Science fiction as a genre encourages play with common understandings of gender and sexuality. Tiptree’s work was mainly published in the 70s; since then, the social, medical, and psychological theories of gender and sexuality have greatly

expanded. Theorists have often overlooked the implications of Tiptree's work on queer theory. The context of queerness in his work has been either glossed over or entirely erased. Establishing Tiptree's work in gender theory and exploring his work as it investigates and questions gender in a complex and subversive way is necessary for expanding the queer literary canon. Explorations of non-binary genders, the normalization of bisexuality, and more opportunities and education surrounding transgender experiences all create a new lens through which to view Tiptree's writing and Sheldon's experiences. Although it is irresponsible to directly impose modern ideas of gender onto Tiptree's experiences and writing, it is a unique way to read the writing: Tiptree's experiences and the theories he developed in his writing influence and transform modern queer concepts.

Reading Tiptree's work as a transgressive view of gender, which disrupts or at least critiques the binary, is important for individuals who do not see themselves represented. Furthermore, it allows readers to observe the ways in which gender and sexuality have developed as concepts in recent years, and how those concepts have roots in ideas formulated by Sheldon as early as the 1930s.

Overall, I hope that my research integrates Tiptree more thoroughly into the canon of gay literature, and also highlights the importance of gay literature in society today and for the future. I also hope that Tiptree can also be understood as more than a penname for a female writer. Instead, I would like readers of Tiptree to understand the fluidity of his gender and the ideas at work behind it, as well as the way that his erotic writing can complicate ideas of gender relationships and sex difference. With a

complete understanding of Tiptree's experience and gender, he can be understood as a queer writer, with a gender that is not only complicated but also revolutionary.

I argue that Sheldon not only used Tiptree as a penname but as a representative of her relationship with an aspect of herself that she perceived as masculine, and this complicated gender identity can be better understood through turning her work into theory, and then using that theory to read her work.

Methodology and Strategy

My method for this project will be literary analysis through various lenses and of various sources. I am using multiple primary sources from Sheldon's personal writing, all of which contain relevant aspects of Sheldon's personal gender theory. I am using general formal and contextual analysis to find the key points or theses in Sheldon's gender theory, especially in regard to biological essentialism, the relationship between masculinity and femininity, and homosexual relationships. Her theories on gender are complicated as well: analysis of certain passages and language usage have indicated that Sheldon believes in heterosexual sexual relationships *only* for procreation, and that women should engage in same-sex relations frequently for emotional reasons. Her perspective on feminism, as determined by examples in her essays but also personal diaries, are that there is no way for women to become equal in their relationships, and must therefore divorce themselves from femininity, or even further, from society (establishing femininity as a constraint).

I then read three short stories: "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" "The Women Men Don't See," and "Love is the Plan the Plan is Death." Out of Tiptree's short stories, these are not only relatively well-known but contain discussion regarding the discourse that Sheldon began in her personal works.

"Love is the Plan the Plan is Death" discusses an alien species with exaggerated sexual dimorphism. The titular plan refers to the life cycle of the creatures that ultimately leads to extreme violence and familicide. The central character, Moggadeet, attempts to resist the Plan but is ultimately cannibalized by his mate Lililoo, confirming the destructive nature of male and female relationships. "The Women Men Don't See"

follows a Don, a government agent, Ruth and her daughter Althea, and a male pilot when their plane crashes an isolated island, stranding the group. Don and Ruth split up to search for water, and Don becomes increasingly irritated by Ruth's calm behavior which he sees as unfeminine. As they converse, Ruth reveals that she believes feminism is a pointless endeavor. A group of aliens then descend to the island, and Ruth and her daughter choose to go with the aliens. Finally, "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" introduces The Sunbird, a ship full of male astronauts, when it is sent adrift in space after being damaged by a solar flare. The astronauts begin to pick up radio signals from a ship known called the Gloria, which to the men's surprise, is managed by a female crew. The men board the women's ship, and learn that they had travelled through not only space but also time; a plague on Earth had wiped out all men, and the planet's current population consists of the clones of the surviving 11,000 women. When his crewmates express violent thoughts, the narrator, Lorimer, observes that the women are planning on killing the men for their violence. Lorimer defends them, claiming that it is in the nature of men to have these thoughts. The men are ultimately killed, and their sperm is harvested to produce new genotypes.

I will read these stories through the theses established by Sheldon's personal work, to look for hints of this theory in her short fiction. These works are all narrated through the perspective of men, which is extremely relevant because much of Tiptree's work focuses on femininity as perceived by society, and more importantly, male society. My thesis is that Sheldon not only used Tiptree as a penname but as a representative of her relationship with an aspect of herself that she perceived as

masculine, and this complicated gender identity can be better understood through turning her work into theory, and then using that theory to read her work.

I will also be using secondary sources to build my argument: the biography written by Julie Phillips, entitled *James Tiptree Jr: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*, covers aspects of Sheldon's life and relationships in detail. Having objective information regarding Sheldon's life, which was done with the same materials I have access to, will help build my argument and support claims about Sheldon's life. The book falls short, in my opinion, of fully understanding Sheldon's gender theory, so I hope to fill in the blanks of Phillips' work with this thesis. I will also be using scholarly articles about Tiptree's work (specifically queer readings), which will substantiate my claims and provide insight into a different perspective on Tiptree's science fiction and queer theory.

Alice Sheldon's Personal Work and Emergent Queer Theory

Alice Sheldon developed a large amount of gender theory through her personal work, including diaries, letters, and essays. Much of this work is in the form of discussion about gender roles and relationships, the theoretical and practical nature of gender, and the relationship between biological and social expressions of gender. This work helps not only to illuminate Sheldon's ideas regarding gender, which are incorporated into Tiptree's public science fiction work, but also to understand the personal nature of Sheldon's work and considerations of her own gender. By evaluating some of these relevant works and constructing a few prominent hypotheses regarding gender, it becomes easier to understand the theoretical assertions in Tiptree's published fiction, and how they relate to his own personal life and relationships.

Sheldon's gender Theories in Scattered Erotic Notes (1935)

The first relevant personal work is a journal written by Sheldon in 1935. The journal explores Sheldon's early conception of gender, sexuality, and gender difference; these ideas can be expanded upon to better understand concepts of gender in her later essays and published works. The journal's contents is described in the archives as "scattered erotic notes," and contains fragments of erotic fiction, loose ideas about gender and sex in general, and thoughts about Sheldon's own experience with gender and sexuality.

One page contains a very short erotic fiction story about three young women, and considers the eroticism in the context of hermaphroditic features, gender confusion, and lesbianism: "'Oh, you are the perfect hermaphrodite,' said Sonya, looking at Van in frank boredom, but have you any little shemaphrodites? No, said Van, but I have

Madeline's lean flanks – 'Ok, babe,' said the girl with something lovely about her eyes, but remember, my husband's coming home at six and he'll probably knock your marvelous block off..."³ This piece is nebulous and stream-of-consciousness in terms of form and style, and serves as a reflection of Sheldon's impulses towards homosexuality, hermaphroditism, and complex gender. The term "shemaphodite" plays on the feminine "her" in "hermaphrodite," and indicates an identity that is simultaneously androgynous and feminine, suggesting a connection between lesbian attraction and gender fluidity, and how same-sex attraction allows for this fluidity in ways that heterosexual relationships would restrict. "The girl with someone lovely about her eyes" (who may be Sonya or Madeline,) states that her husband is returning soon, which alludes to homosexual activity operating even in heterosexual relationships.

There are also sections of writing that pertain specifically to Sheldon's own sex.

She writes:

By god in so far as I am an artist I can wish for women beautiful women women women with soft asses (arses to you) and breasts goddamn I want to ram myself with a crazy soft woman and come, come, spend, come, make her pregnant jesus to be a man to come in coming flesh I love women I will never be happy I will live drunk but women, free women, I want to (?) a damned woman to spend in coming crazy gripping flesh to come to spend oh god...

Sheldon expresses here her attraction towards women, but in the context of biologically heterosexual relationships: she indicates her desire for the ability to penetrate and impregnate women. This suggests Tiptree's inclination towards male biology, and therefore transness, while also complicating the nature of lesbianism and same-sex attraction in general. This complication of biological sexual nature, sexuality, and

³ Sheldon, Alice, 1935, Coll 455, Box 11, Folder 2, Alice B. Sheldon, pen name James Tiptree, Jr., papers, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, Oregon.

gender expression can be tracked through Tiptree's later personal and published work. Several other notes in the journal contribute to the idea of Sheldon as transgender or genderqueer: "Oh god pity me I am love damned they say it is ego in me I know it is man all I want is a man's life. I can almost be sick to play my part my damned oh my damned body how can I escape it I play woman woman I cannot live and breathe I cannot even make things I am going crazy. Thank god for liquor..." The claim "They say it is ego in me I know it is man" connects to an essentialism concept of women as nurturing/humble and men as egotistical/violent: Sheldon recognizes certain feelings as inherently masculine, and her femininity as an act or a role that is not natural to her. She also writes: "I am no damned woman wasteful god not to have made me a man." All the entries in this journal work through Sheldon's concepts of her own gender as being trans-masculine, and of this masculinity also being connected to same-sex attraction. Although there is no direct confirmation of Sheldon as a trans individual, this journal illuminates some of the biographical information regarding her own gender, and the ideas that support that, specifically the complication of sexuality and gender.

Femininity and Society (1935)

In the same year, Sheldon wrote an essay entitled *Femininity and Society*, which considers the nature of female existence in society as well as considerations of sexual relationships. She writes:

For the purposes of this society it is necessary to clarify the terms masculine and feminine. At this stage in the development of human civilization, the male must be regarded as the basic human type. Half of the population is female, but there is only one environment which is especially suited to them, the home. As soon as an impulse or activity carries the individual beyond the home (physically or mentally), it must be regarded as a masculine impulse, although it operates in a feminine

body. The feminine sexual impulse towards passivity, if it go roaming abroad in an effort to be satisfied, is operating in a masculine manner.⁴

She presents a concept of gendered behavior that is simultaneously essentialist and trans: a set of traits that are inherent to each sex, but which can be present in either men or women. Sheldon's concept of unique gendered traits that can be experienced by either biological sex complicates the idea of essentialist thinking by both confirming it and denying it: she argues that some traits are inherently masculine, but can be transmuted between the sexes.

Early 20th century sexology worked with a theory called "sexual inversion," which is similar to Sheldon's theoretical work here and provides a useful framework for understanding it. The theory of sexual inversion posits that gay men and lesbian women experienced an "inverted" internal gender expression. Sexology sought to define the biological and psychological nature behind homosexuality, and although it was deeply flawed (as we understand more through modern investigations into gender and sexuality), sexual inversion seems similar to some of Tiptree's theoretical understandings of sex, gender, and attraction. "Researchers saw lesbianism as a complex problem with psychological, somatic, social, and cultural dimensions...specifically, given the assumed "masculinity" of lesbians, the researchers were confused when they found evidence of femininity in sex variant women ..."⁵ The concept of lesbians as inverted and therefore masculine women is expressed here in Tiptree's understanding of "masculine impulse operating in a feminine body;" women who are not interested in heterosexual reproduction (and by extension, the traditional

⁴ Sheldon, Alice, 1935, Coll 455, Box 4, Folder 4, Alice B. Sheldon, pen name James Tiptree, Jr., papers, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, Oregon.

⁵ Terry, "Lesbians Under the Medical Gaze: Scientists Search for Remarkable Differences" (Journal of Sex Research, 1990) 318

feminine experience of nurturing, motherhood, etc.), were, according to Sheldon, essentially men. Sheldon's views aligned with this as well, in the sense that she understood masculinity and femininity as fundamental opposites that could be experienced by individuals of either biological sex. Sheldon, because of her attraction to women and her aversion to motherhood, potentially understood herself as an inverted individual (especially because these ideas were being developed during her formative years), with Tiptree being an expression of this inversion. Unlike the prominent sexology, Tiptree did not see this inversion as unnatural, or a problem to fix, but a natural occurrence for many women, especially homosexual women.

Something to Remember Me By (1940)

In 1940, Sheldon elaborated on her theory of women's role in society in a diary entry entitled *Something to Remember Me By*. This entry is an introduction to Sheldon's more cynical assessment of feminism and its ability to achieve equality for women. She writes:

...If she chooses to look upon herself as a member of the race of Women, if her honour is bound up with those similar to her, she is automatically drafted into a fight which will absorb her whole life and embitter every day. Her mother must be revenged upon her father and her sisters upon her brothers. Their very minds must be rescued from the hold of the enemy. No home, no social life is possible to her. To merely attempt to not be slighted will engage her at all times.⁶

Sheldon's theory of women's status in society contends that there is no method for escape; One can either succumb to it and suffer the indignities of being a woman in society, or can fight against it, and be "engaged" in the fight for her entire life. Either of these options is draining and does not allow for a happy life in any capacity. This can be

⁶ Sheldon, Alice, 1940-1955, Coll 455, Box 5, Folder 6, Alice B. Sheldon, pen name James Tiptree, Jr., papers, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, Oregon

theoretically illuminated by the similar theoretical work of Helene Cixous, in
“Castration or Decapitation:”

An education that consists of trying to make a soldier of the feminine by force, the force history keeps reserved for woman, the "capital" force that is effectively decapitation. Women have no choice other than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is that if they don't actually lose their heads by the sword, they only keep them on condition that they lose them—lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons.⁷

The only condition under which women do not suffer, and ultimately experience death/pain, is to suffer the social decapitation of falling in line with femininity. This severely limits a woman’s ability for expression beyond the narrow binary, and therefore prohibits any true freedom.

In 1955, Sheldon revisited this essay, and reiterated certain claims:

...I believe every word of it. (In 1955) By the time the modern young woman gets to an age where she can take stock of her place in the world she is in a morally bankrupt condition. ... So, the woman who wishes to have a ‘normal’ home and children and honour must call it a truce. But she must not acquiesce emotionally in her inferior status, tacitly allow the truth to be called a victory. She must accept it without comment, without martyrdom, but never with enthusiasm. The words ‘I love you’ cannot be said to another person who seriously believes that he will be somehow debased if you breathe as much oxygen as he does. Love is only possible between equals.

The feminist theory developed here reflects the cynical worldview that Sheldon maintains throughout most of her personal and published work: that there is no way, under existing circumstances, that women would ever be able to experience freedom and happiness. The statement “Love is only possible between equals” suggests that no

⁷ Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” (University of Chicago Press, 1981) 42-43

heterosexual relationship could allow for fulfillment, which substantiates Sheldon's other claims that homosexual relationships are fundamentally healthier for women.

Notes on Sexuality with Huntington (1945)

In 1945, Sheldon recorded in a diary her thoughts on her sexual relationship with her husband, Huntington. In the entry, she uses the letter (S) to refer to herself, and (H) refers to Huntington. This diary entry explores ideas of heterosexual relationships and Sheldon's perspective on her own sexuality; it provides valuable insight into the biographical aspect of Sheldon's sexuality as well as theorization of sexual equality between men and women. She writes: "S. is struck with the reality of H.'s sexual status as a permanent ten-year-old. Gasping mouth like a young seagull, darting tongue, breath like a cat. Fat, debility, pokings and lungings [sic], dry rising tempo of masturbation, smiles, gasps, rockings, sudden extinction. An entirely unshared experience. Woman's presence apparently a nominal excuse."⁸ This generally negative and critical description makes Sheldon's sexual dissatisfaction obvious, and her resentment for Huntington's inability to meet her inner sexual desires is extended into a general thesis that women are "nominal" in heterosexual sex. She also acknowledges male masturbatory sexual behavior, suggesting that men's engagement in sex is primarily masturbatory (without regard for the interest of the woman, making her completely detached from the act). Sheldon's perception of heterosexual sex as dissatisfactory for women informs her later theorization of homosexual relationships as a necessity.

⁸ Sheldon, Alice, April 23, 1945 – July 25, 1945, Coll 455, Box 11, Folder 14, Alice B. Sheldon, pen name James Tiptree, Jr., papers, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, Oregon.

Men and Women (1950s)

In “Men and Women,” (1950s) Sheldon reflects on the differences in biology and personality between men and women. She theorizes sexual cycles and the fundamental differences in sexuality between men and women. She writes:

They [women] are more apart from their bodies than men are; having a woman’s body is quite something; it is like being the owner of a large and only partly tamed animal, day and night the damned thing is being itself, with its own semi-inscrutable operations. Even to the owner, a woman’s body partakes of something of the perverseness and animism of the primitive Earth. It is like being attached to a sleepless, amoebic, oozing, urgent, swelling, welling, vegetable animal, forever slipping out of control and leaking is pseudopod round the corner, slippery, coy, occasionally utterly and devastatingly flat, and at other times bubbling with vitality and promising to ride one to the moon. An unpredictable, volcanic, treacherous, merry, rather overempowering thing to live with.⁹

This theory of the female body, as being an uncontrollable and primitive structure, indicates an inherent discomfort with the self and the body that Sheldon feels is fundamental to womanhood. In the theory of womanhood and femininity as a form of confinement, the concept of the body as uncomfortable and “out of control” informs and expands on the understanding of femininity as uncomfortable. This idea of lack of control can also be understood in relationship to the idea of essentialism, in that it suggests that existence in a female body is unavoidably tied to discomfort, leaving no room for escape or flexibility.

Sheldon, in this piece, also reflects on the nature of sexual relationships between men and women:

I sometimes wonder what the best arrangement would be, with the two halves of the human race atyp [sic] desiring substantially different things

⁹ Sheldon, Alice, ca. 1950s, Coll 455, Box 5, Folder 24, Alice B. Sheldon, pen name James Tiptree, Jr., papers, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, Oregon.

from each other. Barring such few members of each sex... the individual man is not, by himself, a suitable mate for the individual woman, and the same is true in reverse. I think a great deal more homosexual activity on the part of women is indicated—which is undoubtedly taking place, anyway. However, at present the social attitudes are so inadequate; the homosexual develops [sic] taboos toward the opposite sex, and there is a general atmosphere of pomposity, sniggering and bad feeling all around.

Sheldon posits that men and women cannot satisfy each other sexually because they are too different in terms of their wants and needs. For this reason, she suggests that women should participate in homosexual activity regularly. Furthermore, she believes during the sexual cycle, women should have sex with multiple men during their fertile period and have sex with women during periods of non-fertility. This theorization provides the framework for much of Tiptree's published work, specifically in terms of evaluations of homo- vs heterosexuality, as well as the essentialist formation of the body.

Men and Mothers (1974)

Tiptree communicated often via letters with Joanna Russ, a science fiction author and queer feminist contemporary. The two shared a close friendship as demonstrated by their correspondence, although Russ was not aware of Tiptree's true identity until it was publicly revealed. While under the penname of Tiptree (or, affectionately, Tip) Russ and Tiptree discussed their theories of gender and sex. In one such letter, in October of 1974, Tiptree communicated his frustration with traditional sexual roles to Russ: "I hate to say this but one of the most sexually sane woman friends I have had was – is – an almost complete homo. I begin to wonder if female sexuality isn't a biological accident, a nightmarish side-product of your inherent masculinity (all

women's, I mean.) Maybe there are only 2 sexes, men and mothers.”¹⁰ This suggests that Tiptree understands *all female sexuality* outside of reproductive as inverted, sexuality as fundamentally masculine, but also ties it to the “sexual sanity” of his lesbian friend. This may suggest that the only route to sexual sanity is through inversion towards masculinity. The only comfort for women who don't feel inclined towards motherhood is towards inversion. This theory can illuminate Tiptree's understanding of the “place” that exists for women who don't feel comfortable in the subjugated role of motherhood, his general theory that women who experience sexual desire are fundamentally masculine, *and* his common literary theme of women seeking survival outside the traditional gendered system.

Diary, 1977

In a diary entry written in 1977, Sheldon reflects on her identity as Tiptree and his ability to resolve what she conceived as a complete biological inequity. She also makes a mention of “Alex,” who she defines as a male version of herself.

I am not a man, I am not the do-er, the penetrator. And Tiptree was my ‘magical’ manhood, his pen my prick. I had through him all one power – prestige of masculinity, I was – through an aging intellectual – of those who run the world. How I loathe being a woman. Wanting to be done to. Well, some men have masochistic fantasies – the hell with them. (Alex doesn't) It's my body, the damn female apparatus. Never to have been on the “winning side”, never to have known the simple power (and pleasure) of the penis; external, adrenalized genitalia. For a long time I tried to face ... being a woman, an eternal second-best. I hadn't realized how deep it ran, how precious to me was my “secret manhood” (Tiptree) The prestige, the acceptance, the being listened

¹⁰ Sheldon, Alice, January 15, 1974 – December 16, 1974, Coll 455, Box 74, Folder 4, Alice B. Sheldon, pen name James Tiptree, Jr., papers, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, Oregon.

to. I guess I see the world too much in terms of simple power. I'd give all my life for 24 hours of being a young, burly male, able to rape.¹¹ For Sheldon, Tiptree represented a power that she did not (and seemingly could never) have access to. Sheldon felt unhappy not only with her societal status, but also with her body: she articulates her desire for male sexual organs and the ability to penetrate sexually. She conflates her desire for a masculine identity with her attraction to women: together, these formed the idea of wanting to be a man both physically and societally. This informs theories of Tiptree as transgender, and defines that Tiptree not only existed as a penname with the interest of improving Sheldon's chances of publication, but as a deeply personal and necessary expression of masculinity. The claim that "Tiptree was my magical manhood, his pen my prick" indicates that the masculine aspect of Tiptree was important personally to Sheldon beyond the public image, and allowed for exploration into aspects of his identity that were otherwise suppressed.

Conclusions from Sheldon's Personal Work

Throughout these personal pieces, Sheldon maintains several theoretical themes, phrases, and general ideas. She frequently uses the term "damned" in reference to her own gender identity, the female body in general, and the woman that she expresses attraction towards. The word "damned" could be interpreted in various ways: as an expression of Sheldon's perception of women's liberation (in that women are *damned*), or as a condemnation of women themselves. The use of the term "damned" introduces a complex double-meaning where Sheldon simultaneously feels for the plight of women while also condemning them or viewing them negatively. This also indicates Sheldon's

¹¹ Sheldon, Alice, January 11, 1977- November 11, 1977, Coll 455, Box 12, Folder 4, Alice B. Sheldon, pen name James Tiptree, Jr., papers, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, Oregon.

adherence to the essentialist binary, where her aversion to femininity (as kindness, nurturance, etc.) attracts her directly towards masculinity (as violence, aggression, and ego). Sheldon's resentment for her experience as a woman bleeds into a resentment for femininity in general, the female body, and for other women, with whom she felt she lacked an important quality of kinship. By damning women, Tiptree engages in the verbal violence that he associates with the essentialist binary, while also lamenting his own status as the "eternal second-best." Tiptree's development of ideas surrounding essentialist binaries, specifically in terms of the biological nature of men and women as opposites, is constructed in part by her personal experience and opinion of herself and her own gender, which illuminates why she may simultaneously engage with and deny these binaries.

This work also addresses not only Sheldon's personal sexuality but also her perception of sexuality in general. Her attraction to women is made obvious in many of these pieces, where she connects her attraction to women to her sense of masculinity, often wishing she had male genitalia in order to engage in "heterosexual" sex with women. This concept works with the connections between gender identity and sexual identity. Sheldon also discusses lesbian separatism and political lesbianism, through the concept that sexual/romantic relationships between men and women cannot be equal in any sense. This concept of lesbian separatism is maintained as one of the only possible avenues for feminine liberation, but also as the only avenue for genuine sexual satisfaction: Sheldon suggests that such a deep difference exists between men and women that it would render them incapable of satisfying each other sexually.

Overall, Sheldon's personal work articulates an idea of general incompatibility between men and women and masculinity and femininity, and this incompatibility extends into the simultaneous confirmation and denial of biological essentialism that dictates behavior, sexuality, social relationships, and personal experience with gender.

Sci-Fi as Queer Expression

In the 1960s and 70s, the feminist movement sought to raise social consciousness regarding the social, political, and cultural concerns of women. Science fiction provided a unique space to discuss those issues, especially due to its situation as a traditionally masculine genre. Authors like Joanna Russ and Ursula K Le Guinn joined Tiptree Jr. in publishing feminist science fiction that explored expansive ideas of gender and sexuality. “The Women Men Don’t See,” by James Tiptree Jr., specifically garnered respect for Tiptree as a male feminist, who not only understood the plight of women in a way perceived by many as deeply personal, but also in a way that communicated easily with male readers. Tiptree’s male-narrated stories bridged the gap between male and female readers by communicating directly to each gender.

Not only does science fiction provide a compelling lens for feminist theory and ideology, but it also approaches queer interpretations. As “The Women Men Don’t See” explores the social aspects of feminism, other science fiction stories, such as “Love is the Plan,” explore a queer interpretation of biology, reproduction, and inherent sexual difference. In “Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer,” Wendy Pearson addresses the nature of sci-fi as being especially capable of discussing and understanding queer possibilities: “a movement beyond the inclusionary towards a radical re-writing of the assumption within the show of the naturalness, endurance, and fixity of our current understandings of sexuality and its relationship both to the sex/gender dyad and to sociocultural institutions”¹² Science fiction provides space to explore the queer as in a deviation from the norm, and can be represented through ideas

¹² Pearson, “Alien Cryptographies,” 2.

of the alien and the Other. Systems that define “natural” and “queer” are called into question, and ideas understood as fundamental truth (biologically essentialist concepts of relationships between the body and gender identity) can be complicated and denaturalized by science fiction in order to entertain and explore concepts that are not often discussed. In regard to this idea of Otherness, Pearson describes Tiptree’s specific relationship with queering and denaturalizing nature:

The quality of their otherness can only be understood as a doubling effect, just as the queerness of the text depends on the reader's particular subject position and willingness to indulge in different reading protocols. The alien/Others are both ineluctably masculine and, like Tiptree him/herself, not masculine at all, since the mere fact of their otherness equates them synecdochically with the female, the black, the queer. As Jackson suggests, the subject of the science fiction story is ‘not the cause but the effect of the system that sustains it.’¹³

Through science fiction, Tiptree makes use of an effective tool: by introducing the known to the Other (the modern human to the alien), he works with what readers consider queer, and why they consider it queer. By defining the natural (masculine) body and positioning it against the unnatural (feminine) body, Tiptree provides the accepted framework for a “normal” figure, and then denies the authority of this framework by extending it into the queer, and exploring the possibilities of existence beyond the norm.

In his genre spotlight on science fiction in the 1976 edition of *Library Journal*, “Imagined Multiverses: Speculative fiction is unconstrained by the expectation of a single view of the world,” Eric Norton evaluates speculative science fiction as “especially suited to address humanity’s rich diversity.”¹⁴ Science fiction is capable of

¹³ Ibid, 17

¹⁴ Norton, “Imagined Multiverses” 1.

creating distance from existing frameworks such as gender, sexuality, and misogyny; this lack of restriction allows for an expansion of all these concepts. In her personal work, Sheldon expresses her understanding of womanhood (and subjugation) as completely inescapable. If she believes that essentialism is always at play on Earth, then Tiptree's work with imagined worlds allows him to explore a denaturalized concept of gender, apart from existing essentialist and heterosexist ideas, and to form novel conceptualizations of gender and sex.

Queer Reading of Published Works

The Alien Body

The concept of the alien body is an important aspect of queer understandings of Tiptree's work and science fiction in general: removal from the existing gendered body allows for explorations of gender and sex beyond the binary. In "Alien Bodies and a Queer Future: Sexual Revision in Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild' and James Tiptree, Jr's 'With Delicate Mad Hands,'" Amanda Thibodeau reflects on this concept: "While alien bodies have often represented feared "otherness," they offer feminist science fiction a rich site for the re-imagining of gender, sexuality, and identity within narratives that challenge the heteronormative implications of "progress" built into space exploration narratives"¹⁵. Alien species allow for an exploration of queer sexualities and gender because they are removed from the explicitly defined definitions practiced by humans. The alien body can be constructed in any way imaginable, while heteronormative and strictly gendered and sexualized ideas can be disregarded and reimagined. "Love is the Plan" is a good example of this, as it explores the concepts of destructive heterosexuality, fluid sexuality and biology, the relationship between mother and child, etc. in a way that isn't tied to already-established boundaries. Even within this new alien body, however, Tiptree establishes distinct gendered divisions through color and size, altering some conceptions of the gendered body and reiterating others. Like Tiptree's approach to other vital topics such as essentialism and sexuality, the alien body is nuanced and provides not only theoretical constructions of the concept but also self-critical evaluations of those constructions.

¹⁵ Thibodeau, "Alien Bodies and a Queer Future," 263.

Another representation of the alien body can be seen in “The Women Men Don’t See.” These aliens have much less to do with gender than in “Love is the Plan the Plan is Death,” which makes a statement within the realm of the story. Don Fenton’s obsession with gender difference consumes the narration of the story; his shock at Ruth’s calmness in the face of imminent danger to his complete investment in both Ruth and her daughter as sexual objects proves that his worldview is situated within an essentialist viewpoint of gender difference, and his identification of Ruth and Althea as opposite to himself and Captain Esteban influences his decisions and attitudes. The aliens, however, are completely devoid of any gendered markers. Their ambiguous nature disrupts Fenton’s highly gendered perceptions; whether correctly or not, Fenton makes his assumptions based on the gender of those around him, so a genderless alien becomes impossible for him to understand. To Ruth, there is a comfort in understanding the aliens as beyond gender, because she believes a fight for gender equality is doomed from the beginning by the history of gender on Earth. A genderless alien allows her to understand that, by going with them, she and her daughter would not be confined to the same rigid structures based on their femininity, and would have possibilities never afforded to them on Earth. To Fenton, the genderlessness of the aliens causes a distinct panic, because gender is so central to his understanding of the world and his place in it.

New Wave science fiction in the 60s and 70s, particularly feminist sf, explores the queerly constructed alien as a way of representing the possibilities of sex and gender. Tiptree suggests in much of his work that the masculine impulse towards control, conquering, understanding, etc. can be redefined (or refined) to access a queer utopia. The only possibility for utopia is a genderless one, but it remains difficult, or even

impossible, for Tiptree's human characters to reach beyond gender. The alien body provides a canvas for gender denaturalization and a site to explore possibilities beyond modern biological and social gender.

The Female Body

In his stories, Tiptree situates the female body as, in many ways, similar to the alien body: they both represent the visual and social Other, cast opposite to the "natural" male body. In Sheldon's 1950s essay "Men and Women," she evaluates the female body as "amoebic, oozing, urgent, swelling..." This theory of the female body, as being an uncontrollable and primitive structure, indicates an inherent discomfort with the self and the body that Sheldon feels is fundamental to womanhood. In the theory of womanhood and femininity as a form of confinement, the concept of the body as uncomfortable and "out of control" informs and expands on the understanding of femininity as uncomfortable. This idea of lack of control can also be understood in relationship to the idea of essentialism. Sheldon also casts the female body here as alien, or other; it is detached from what readers would understand as human, and Sheldon's language ("amoebic, oozing") is reminiscent of a bizarre and alien structure. This connection between the female body and the alien body suggests that the alien and the female human are both entirely "othered," while the male body takes the place of the natural. Tiptree's science fiction, in some ways, fuses the feminine and the alien, which illuminates his conceptualization of women's place in society.

The seemingly unavoidable natural status of the female body, as being uncontrollable and in some ways having a mind of its own, is reflected in "Love is the Plan the Plan is Death," not only in Lilliloo's needing to be bound and ultimately

devouring Moggadeet, but also earlier in the story, when Moggadeet witnesses his mother eating his sibling. “A black body is lying under Mother’s claws. It is my brother Sesso – yes! But Mother is tearing him, is eating him! ... ‘Go,’ she groans. ‘Go, too late. Mother no more.’”¹⁶ The unavoidable transformation from Mother into murderer, as part of the Plan that controls the species, reflects a lack of control in the choices the Mother makes, informing the idea that certain actions are prescribed to gendered roles, and are ultimately unavoidable, and even driven forward by the female body. Tiptree articulates here (informed by his personal writing) that the biology of the female body drives it by necessity into a tragic biological conclusion, participating in the larger heterosexual bind.

The female body is also explored in its relationship to men: more specifically, through the viewpoint of male characters. In “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?” narrated, as many of Tiptree’s works are, by a man, the descriptions of women include terms such as “plain,” “moonfaced,” and “almost pretty.”¹⁷ In “The Women Men Don’t See,” Don Fenton describes the Parsons as “small, plain, and neutral colored.”¹⁸ The way that men perceive women in Tiptree’s works -- severely critical and often negative – reflects the way that Sheldon speaks about herself in her diaries. The judgmental opinions that men have about women in Tiptree’s works seem to be a projection of Sheldon’s understanding of herself and her own body. In “The Laboratory of Me: Life as an Experiment,” she writes: “My general build is mesomorphic, the wrists, neck, and ankles a shade too thin for the larger hands, feet and head. My hips are set low, although

¹⁶ Tiptree, “Love is the Plan the Plan is Death,” n.p.

¹⁷ Tiptree, “Houston, Houston, Do You Read,” n.p.

¹⁸ Tiptree, “The Women Men Don’t See,” n.p.

I appear long-legged, which gives me a good gait flat-footed. My body is wider than thick; I still have a rather flat long waist, which looks a little slimmer than I really am.”¹⁹ This description is detailed and critical, generally negative, and anticipates the description of women in Tiptree’s works. In these ways, Tiptree expresses his dysmorphic understanding of his own body, with a certain degree of masculine distaste and sexual criticism.

The female body is significant to queer understandings of science fiction: in “Home and Hell: Representations of Female Masculinity in Action-Driven Science Fiction Literature,” Anna Bark Persson writes:

Comporting one’s body in an unfeminine manner as a woman is to take up space in a queer way... The lines of heteronormativity move us towards the reproduction of the heterosexual nuclear family and away from queer alternatives; the body is not only the site of our experience of the world, but also the way through which we become oriented towards certain kinds of lifelines.²⁰

This speaks conceptually to Sheldon’s understanding of her own body and the bodies of all women, and how the detachment from (or extension beyond) the body may be the only avenue towards feminine liberation. Tiptree, for Sheldon, represented a mind *without* a body, which allowed Sheldon to fully express her thoughts and ideas without being tethered to the overpowering feminine body. “Home and Hell” works with the queerness of changing the function of the body, a feminine body acting in a masculine way and existing in queer space. This connects to “Love is the Plan,” where the alien species is explicitly defined in terms of gender difference; the males are large and black and the females are small and red. This draws significant attention to the body and the ways in which they are fundamentally different (an idea which Tiptree seems invested

¹⁹ Sheldon, “The Laboratory of Me,” n.p.

²⁰ Persson, “Home and Hell” 73.

in, as he believes thoroughly in sex difference). The abstract writing style of the piece acknowledges the biological drives surmounting intelligent/complex thought.

Moggadeet feels himself driven forward by his masculinity, articulated through the concept of “black,” the masculine sexual identifier: “I roar again. No—*it roars me*, the new power of black. Yet deep inside, Myself-Moggadeet is watching, fearing.”²¹ The masculine impulse within Moggadeet takes action in spite of him, even against him; suggesting that the masculine nature is powerful enough to override personal nature. The aliens in this story are also affected by external temperature; during the warm seasons, they are intelligent and able to control their behavior, but in the cold, their violent biological impulses take over. The theoretical implication is that sexual dimorphism has an impact on the individual, who can sometimes think beyond the biological sexual impulse, but ultimately falls back into the “plan,” the “trap” of gender and sex relationships. This is in line with Tiptree’s general pessimism regarding the role of women in society, as well as his general detachment from femininity because of his inability to relate to the feminine reproductive role.

Even as it seems to solidify sexual reproductive roles, the story also complicates them. Because the mother always cannibalizes the father, the alien species has no concept of fatherhood- the parental role is always defined as “mother.” For this reason, Moggadeet refers to himself as Lililoo’s mother due to his inclination to take a protective role over her. This draws back to Tiptree’s longstanding theoretical theme in his fiction of complicating or reversing the typical gendered roles.

²¹ Tiptree, “Love is the Plan the Plan is Death,” n.p.

Gendered Space

The concept of gendered space appears frequently in Tiptree's work, and can help contextualize the queer and feminist theory operating in his short stories and novellas. Notably, both "The Women Men Don't See" and "Houston, Houston, Do You Read," begin (and introduce their leading characters) in a highly gendered space: the men's bathroom. If we understand bathrooms as highly gendered spaces, involving genitalia but also very *strict* gender division, the introduction of these male characters in the bathroom immediately clues in the reader to the importance of their masculinity. This may have been why so many readers understood Tiptree as a deeply masculine writer, so far as thinking it would be "ridiculous" to assume that Tiptree was secretly a woman - from the first paragraph of these stories, masculinity (and sexual dimorphism) is established.

"The Women Men Don't See" begins with Don Fenton emerging from an airplane bathroom:

I see her first while the Mexicana 727 is barreling down to Cozumel Island. I come out of the can and lurch into her seat, saying "Sorry," at a double female blur. The near blur nods quietly. The younger one in the window seat goes on looking out. I continue down the aisle, registering nothing. Zero. I never would have looked at them or thought of them again.²²

This introduction to the main character states what will remain true as a central theme to the short story: that Don Fenton does not register the women as fully developed people (to the extent of seeing them as a "double female blur,") and acknowledges that he does not, and in other circumstances would never, register or understand them. The fact that

²² Tiptree, "The Women Men Don't See," n.p.

it begins with him emerging from the men's bathroom establishes the masculine space in which he exists.

“Houston, Houston,” takes a different approach, establishing Lorimer as a different sort of masculine character:

Lorimer gazes around the big, crowded cabin, trying to listen to the voices, trying also to ignore the twitch in his insides that means he is about to remember something bad. No help; he lives it again, that long-ago moment. Himself running blindly – or was he pushed? – into the strange toilet at Evanston Junior High. His fly open, his dick in his hand, he can still see the gray zipper edge of his jeans around his pale exposed pecker. The hush. The sickening wrongness of shapes, faces turning. The first blaring giggle. *Girls*. He was in the *girls' can*.²³

The fact that this begins in the girls' restroom rather than the boys', and Lorimer's reaction to it, begins to establish the complex gender relationships at play here. “The sickening wrongness of shapes,” for example, indicates the severe difference between men and women in gendered spaces, and Lorimer's feelings of immense shame (in a way that makes him feel sick), about being in a feminine gendered space, a feminine domain, exposed. This explores the beginning of the reversal that will be seen later, and why it is so fundamentally disquieting for the men on the spaceship *Sunbird* to conceptualize a female-only Earth: the gendered space of the bathroom is expanded to the entire planet, and men (their genitals typically representing their dominance) are emasculated simply by existing, exposed, in a feminine space. This experience (the being exposed and embarrassed the girls' bathroom,) informs Lorimer's conceptualization of women. The *Sunbird* is a comfortable place for him, where he is surrounded by men, but the story begins with him communicating with Connie from the *Gloria*; he immediately makes critical digs at her (and women in general), out loud and

²³ Tiptree, “Houston, Houston, Do You Read,” n.p.

in the narration. Lorimer's statement that "Women are natural poisoners," is influenced by his experience of feeling emasculated by women, and he feels further uncomfortable here by the fact that Connie is "watching [his] reactions," potentially to outsmart him.²⁴ His comment that she probably has never worn makeup is an intentional dig at her supposed lack of femininity; her position of power and intelligence cancels out her femininity for Lorimer. The next time Lorimer addresses his memory of the bathroom, the reader understands that women aren't necessarily at fault for his emasculation. "The memory of gaping jeans flicks at him, the painful end part – the grinning faces waiting for him when he stumbled out. The howls, the dribbles down his leg. Being cool, pretending to laugh too. You shitheads, I'll show you. *I am not a girl.*"²⁵ We may assume, then, that the root of Lorimer's emasculation is not his exposure in a feminine space, but the fact that he was pushed into it by his fellow boys: the shame he feels is in being associated *with* girls, made to feel that he is *less than* because he was put into a feminine space. That Lorimer turns this around to focus his irritation primarily on women speaks to Tiptree's ideas about men's hatred of women (the desire to subjugate them) being rooted in their own insecurity and competition with each other.

The Sexualized Essentialism of the Violence/Nurture Dichotomy

Strictly gendered space is one of the ways that Tiptree explores and conceptualizes essentialism. Essentialism is a vital topic for queer interpretations of Tiptree's work, as he entertains gender and biological/social difference as

²⁴ Ibid, n.p.

²⁵ Ibid, n.p.

simultaneously flexible and rigid. In “James Tiptree Jr: Rereading Essentialism and Ecofeminism in the 1970s,” Rebecca Evans discusses Tiptree’s complicated relationship with gender essentialism in his work. “While he was eventually accused by feminist SF scholars of reinforcing essentialism, he was also, as I discuss below, at one point heralded as the greatest disruption to a belief in gender essentialism that the SF community had ever known”²⁶ Tiptree approaches and entertains essentialism and anti-essentialism without rejecting either. Evans emphasizes the importance of understanding Tiptree’s work as having *no stable* relationship to essentialism in order to understand gender and nature as dynamic.

Essentialism informs Tiptree’s conceptualizations of feminism and separatism: “My feminist stories are all very pessimistic,” Alli admitted, “in the sense that I see only a faint hope for us if we continue living on the same planet with men. I think we could make it if some disease came along and wiped out 999 men out of every 1,000.” Tiptree frames the patriarchy as a natural structure, where men are fundamentally situated as oppressors, and violence is the essential biological truth of men. On the surface, “The Women Men Don’t See” and “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?” imply that male violence is biologically unavoidable, so the only hope for liberation that women have is in complete separatism. At the same time, Evans argues, these stories can be read as cautionary tales that warn against the understanding of men as biologically violent. The feminine side of the spectrum is the assumed natural state of female virtue, what Evans describes as the “ecofeminist association of nature with femininity.”²⁷ The feminization of nature, and assuming that the natural state of femininity is in tune with the Earth,

²⁶ Evans, “James Tiptree Jr,” 225.

²⁷ Ibid, 232.

simultaneously confirms the naturalization of male violence and categorizes all industrialization as patriarchal violence. Tiptree's work with essentialism and anti-essentialism weaves back and forth, intertwining the concepts of gender and nature and then unraveling them again; rather than suggesting essentialism, Tiptree addresses essentialism, considers its foundations, and warns about its dangers. He doesn't disregard the idea of male violence and female virtue, but rather questions if these natural inclinations are informed by biology or history/society.

"Love is the Plan the Plan is Death" demonstrates the complicated conversation of essentialism as well. The essentialist concept is clear: the Plan dictates all gendered action, leading to a grim gendered conclusion beyond the control and against the desires of the aliens. This, alongside the exaggerated sexual dimorphism, illustrates Tiptree's pessimistic essentialist viewpoint, that men and women are fundamentally designed to destroy each other, and striving to defy the Plan for gendered action is hopeless. At the same time, however, Moggadeet and Lililoo cross over their gendered relationships; they become *mother* for each other, distorting the sexual difference between them and creating new definitions and borders for gender.

The triangulation of gender, nature, and essentialism is not solid across Tiptree's stories, or even *within* a single story. Tiptree has no confirmed stance on essentialism given his stories, but rather explores and questions the complexity of essentialism and ecofeminist ideas. Tiptree's stories don't as much serve as a solid statement condemning or praising feminist separatism/utopia, but rather as "useful models

through which we can see how nature and gender are articulated, in ways that at times embrace, at times deconstruct, and at times strategically adopt essentialisms.”²⁸

“Love is the Plan the Plan is Death” both confirms and denies essentialism: it establishes “the plan” as a biologically essentialist force of gender, while also denying and blending gendered lines. Tiptree’s personal theory from “Men and Women” reemerges here: the idea that distinct gendered traits exist, but can operate or exist in either body. At many points in the short story, Moggadeet refers to himself as Lilliloo’s “mother” despite the sexual and romantic nature of their relationship. “Never, I vowed it, never would I leave you—and have I not kept that vow? Never! I, Moggadeet, *I would be your Mother.*”²⁹ The concepts at play in this story not only reflect Sheldon’s theories of gender, but also illuminate and expand upon them. The members of Moggadeet’s species have no concept of fatherhood, since the females eat the males directly after impregnation. Therefore, the concept of protecting and caring for someone is linked directly to a feminine concept, “motherhood,” regardless of the gender of the individual doing the caring. Moggadeet, despite being a male of the species, feels that he is Lilliloo’s *mother*, in a way that is certainly complicated, due to the sexual nature of the relationship.

“When I see your littlest hunting claws upraised my whole gut melts, it floods me. I am all tender jelly. Tender! Oh, tender-fierce like a Mother, I think! Isn’t that how a Mother feels? My jaws are sluicing juice that isn’t hunger-juice—I am choking with fear of frightening you or bruising your tininess—I ache to grip and knead you, to eat you in one gulp, in a thousand nibbles—”³⁰

This section of the text eroticizes the role of mother as much as it romanticizes it;

Moggadeet associates his protective feelings over Lilliloo as being linked to

²⁸ Ibid, 236.

²⁹ Tiptree, “Love is the Plan the Plan is Death,” n.p.

³⁰ Ibid, n.p.

motherhood. Sheldon writes in “Femininity and Society” that “the home may be regarded as the place of preparing food, eating, sleeping, having children. It is also a shelter. The term femininity is applied to a machine and its effects upon its host, biologically sleeping, femininity is a special pair of chromosomes, the male has one.” Femininity, then, is the impulse towards caring, protecting, raising children: if men express this, it is the effect of the one X chromosome that the male possesses. This all leads to the conclusion that motherhood impulse is not restricted to female members of a species, but it is a feminine impulse, nonetheless. This theory also had impact on Sheldon’s personal identity. In a series of letters to Joanna Russ, in October 1974, Tiptree writes: “I begin to wonder if female sexuality isn’t a biological accident, a nightmarish side-product of your inherent masculinity. (All women’s, I mean.) Maybe there are only two sexes, men and mothers.” When Russ responded, upset at Tiptree’s implications, he attempted to elaborate: “Of course women – I suspect most women – have a drive for sexual-genital gratification, but in many of them it may not be linked to the mechanics of the procreative act, or even to men... Would it surprise you if I said I am TERRIFIED of mothers (I had a cannibal one) and am made very uncomfy by mothering?” He later turned in an essay on men and mothers, which declares: “Our view of men and women is infested with the vicious mental habit of seeing any pair of differing things as somehow symmetrical mirrors of each other.”³¹

This discourse illuminates both some of the thinking behind “Love is the Plan” and the rationale behind Tiptree’s comfort in masculinity. Tiptree perceived the sexes as either “men or mothers,” the logic follows that since Sheldon never felt she possessed

³¹ Sheldon, Letters to Joanna Russ, n.p.

the inherent femininity required to be a mother, and had no implication towards motherhood, that she was ultimately a *man*. In *James Tiptree Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*, Julie Phillips writes: “Where do the ‘atypical women’ belong, who are physically not men but temperamentally not mothers? ...Could she refuse the ‘natural’ roles?”³² Sheldon’s personal aversion to motherhood complicated her idea of herself as a feminine figure. Because she did not conceptualize herself as a mother, she created a distance between herself and femininity, naturally feeling that she possessed masculine impulses. This masculine impulse represented itself through Tiptree. “The pattern of men and mothers might... describe the split between Tiptree who wrote about violence and Alli who felt responsible for the world’s pain. Was it Tip who whispered to Alli, ‘I have selfish and destructive drives – therefore *you* are altruistic, compassionate, and nurturant. (You better be.)”³³

This idea of a strict gendered dichotomy, where men are naturally violent and women are naturally gentle, is explored in “The Women Men Don’t See” through Don’s conceptualization of himself and Captain Esteban as masculine. He understands himself and Captain Esteban as being fundamentally violent, and Ruth and Althea as fundamentally fragile. When Ruth insists on coming with Don to search for water, Don is shocked that she would be willing to leave her daughter alone with the male pilot. Captain Esteban shows no real indication to the reader that he may be violent, but Don sees it as a total certainty, drawing attention to the social confirmation of essentialist lines of thought.

³² Phillips, “James Tiptree, Jr.” 102.

³³ *Ibid*, 329.

"I'll come with you," says Mrs. Parsons calmly. I simply stare at her. What new madness has got into Mother Hen? Does she imagine Estéban is too battered to be functional? While I'm being astounded, my eyes take in the fact that Mrs. Parsons is now quite rosy around the knees, with her hair loose and a sunburn starting on her nose. A trim, in fact a very neat, shading-forty.³⁴

In this example, directly after indicating his belief that Esteban would be sexually violent towards Althea, Don sexualizes Ruth. Reading this story as both entertaining and denying essentialism would suggest that Don's own assumption regarding male inclination towards violence is an aspect of its perpetuation. If men figure themselves to be deeply and irrevocably violent, they will follow this to its conclusion, whether or not it were actually natural.

Don also believes a violent sexual nature is in some way attractive to the women in the story.

Well, okay, ladies. We dangerous males retire inside the damp cabin. Through the wind I hear the women laugh softly now and then, apparently cozy in their chilly ibis roost. A private insanity, I decide. I know myself for the least threatening of men; my non-charisma has been in fact an asset jobwise, over the years. Are they having fantasies about Estéban?³⁵

Don refers to both himself and Esteban as dangerous, but acknowledges in the same paragraph that he is "the least threatening of men," and allocates this non-threatening identity as non-charismatic. He closes the statement by wondering if the women are fantasizing about Esteban (indicating that he believes a dangerous or predatory nature is a factor in heterosexual attraction). Don's interest in danger and violence not only stems from competition with other men, but he also believes that this violence is attractive to women. He says: "I have Mrs. Parsons figured now; Mother

³⁴ Tiptree, "The Women Men Don't See," n.p.

³⁵ Ibid, n.p.

Hen protecting only chick from male predators.” The number of times he allocates himself and Esteban as predators, dangerous, etc. seems to imply the natural (essentialist) concept of male violence, but the fact that Ruth and Althea are actually not engaged in this, as revealed later, seems to contradict this. Don sees himself, men in general, as predatory, even as the women don’t think about him at all: this has to do with the concept of essentialism being perpetuated by male historical “nature” and a sense of self-importance.

Don spends a significant amount of time describing Captain Esteban; the description does refer to an idea of biological essentialism by describing his nose as “predatory” (also a racial commentary). The Parsons, on the other hand, he refers to as “tiny,” “competent and impersonal,” “neat but definitely not sexy.” Then, “But something is irritating me. The damn women haven't complained once, you understand. Not a peep, not a quaver, no personal manifestations whatever. They're like something out of a manual.” Don is extremely put off by the nature of the women, which he perceives to be unfeminine, or at least not what he would expect from women in general. He is not only surprised by this, but *irritated* – it annoys him that women are behaving in a manner that he considers unconventional. When Mrs. Parson mentions that she works in GSA records as a librarian, Don thinks: “I know her now, all the Mrs. Parsonses in records divisions, accounting sections, research branches, personnel and administration offices. Tell Mrs. Parsons we need a recap on the external service contracts for fiscal '73.”³⁶ He groups her into a category of woman that he knows and

³⁶ Ibid, n.p.

understands; this categorization allows him to rationalize behavior he sees as generally unfeminine.

Although “Houston, Houston, Do You Read” initially reads as a confirmation of biological essentialism, especially in terms of designations of violence as masculine and nurturing as feminine, the novella contains nuance that questions and complicates essentialism. A feminist utopia story indicates complete female separatism as the only refuse from the biologically naturalized masculine violence, further confirmed by the vocalized violent fantasies of the male crew members of *The Sunbird*. The narrator, Lorimer, believes this to be the case as well, which is ultimately what leads to his (ambiguous, but certainly negative) fate. In this way, Houston operates as a cautionary tale against complete faith in biologically essentialist structures: Lorimer’s argument that men are biologically inclined towards violence is what ultimately traps him in the cycle. “If gendered violence is naturalized, non-separatist possibilities go unseen.”³⁷ The question is never answered (whether or not men are *actually* fundamentally violent), but if everyone understands it as such, then separatism is the only way away from it. Whether or not gendered behavior is actually natural, the historical patterns lead Lorimer to believe as much. Tiptree was inclined towards a fatalist view of male violence that communicated as essentialism, but questioned the concept of “natural” behaviors. This is a different conceptualization of essentialism from the general understanding – it may not be biologically natural, but becomes culturally and historically natural. If Lorimer were to condemn the violence of his crewmates, the

³⁷ Evans, “James Tiptree Jr,” 231.

women may have allowed him to live safely on their new Earth, but Lorimer willingly and emphatically speaks for *all men* in his defense of his crewmates:

“They were good men,” Lorimer repeats elegiacally. He knows he is speaking for it all, for Dave’s Father, for Bud’s manhood, for himself, for Cro-Magnon, for the dinosaurs too, maybe. “I’m a man. By god, yes, I’m angry. I have a right. We gave you all this, we made it all. We built your precious civilization and your knowledge and comfort and medicines and your dreams. All of it. We protected you, we worked our balls off keeping you and your kids. It was hard. It was a fight, a bloody fight all the way. We’re tough. We had to be, can’t you understand? Can’t you for Christ’s sake understand that?”³⁸

This paragraph clearly demonstrates Lorimer’s commitment to essentialist thinking: he emphatically believes that men are “tough” throughout history, and *had to be*. He also establishes essentialist rhetoric that allocates men as protectors, inventors, and leaders, while women are the protected. To this statement, Lady Blue responds:

“We’re are trying, Dr. Lorimer. Of course we enjoy your inventions and we do appreciate your evolutionary role. But you must see there’s a problem. As I understand it, what you protected people from was largely other males, wasn’t it? ... But the fighting is long over. It ended when you did, I believe. We can hardly turn you loose on Earth, and we simply have no facilities for people with your emotional problems.”³⁹

This exchange confirms what Evans theorizes in regard to Tiptree’s relationship to essentialist thinking: it is the line of reasoning that understands men and women as fundamentally different (with men as fundamentally superior) that must be reconsidered in order to achieve a truly equal society. As long as men like Lorimer believe that they must protect women *from* other men (and therefore be in competition with other men) there is no way to gender harmony. Lady Blue emphasizes that the fighting ended when men were wiped out: *because* men believe they must be violent (or are by nature violent) there can be no peace and separatism is the only way to a full life for women.

³⁸ Tiptree, “Houston, Houston, Do You Read,” n.p.

³⁹ Ibid, n.p.

Tiptree theorizes here that adherence to essentialist thinking is the factor that necessitates separatism, and that men act out their violent history *because* they believe it is natural to them. Tiptree's pessimistic viewpoint derives from the idea that it would be almost impossible to denaturalize and unlearn essentialist thinking. If we understand Lorimer's disdain for women and insecurity as being spurred by a competition with other men, this competition can be seen in the way he relate himself to Dave, the captain of the *Sunbird*.

“A personal god, a father-model, man needs that. Dave draws strength from it, and we lean on him. Maybe leaders have to believe. Dave was so great; cheerful, unflappable, patiently working out alternatives, making his decisions on the inevitable discrepancies in the position readings in a way Lorimer couldn't do. A bitch...”⁴⁰ The terms “personal god” and “father-model” demonstrate the masculine power that Lorimer identifies in Dave, and the inherent power in the role of *father* is an obviously gendered distinction. Lorimer refers to himself, in comparison, as a bitch: this criticism compares his insecurity around his inability to be a leader to femininity, indicating that he resents aspects of himself that he perceives as feminine. Lorimer associates his sense of inferiority with femininity, and allocates femininity (and women) as inferior.

The Heterosexual Bind

Inquiries about sexuality are tied up in a concept of heterosexuality as a trap or bind; this conceptual work regarding the idea of heterosexuality can be tracked through

⁴⁰ Ibid, n.p.

Tiptree's published works. "Rereading Science Fiction Queerly" by Veronica Hollinger explores Tiptree's work through the lens of queer theory:

I read Tiptree's feminist stories as explorations of some of the more dismal exigencies of a naturalized heterosexuality, (re)constructed as a kind of inescapable heterosexual bind. While "Houston, Houston" suggests that execution is a viable option to preserve the full range of women's lives, in other stories heterosexuality is constructed as both inevitable and fatal. In stories such as "Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light!" (1976), "The Women Men Don't See" (1973), and "The Screwfly Solution" (1977), women escape into madness, disappear into outer space with unknown aliens, or simply wait to be killed. The unremitting pessimism in these stories arises, at least in part, from Tiptree's determination to follow the implications of gender difference to their grimly logical conclusions; her stories read like darkly parodic representations of the extremes of gender difference.⁴¹

Tiptree sees gender difference as inherent, inescapable, but with grim connotations. The inevitability of heterosexual relationships is seen as a deeply painful truth, which can only be overcome by escaping the paradigm altogether. In "Houston, Houston," this is expressed in the killing of the three male astronauts at the end of the story, therefore erasing any threat to the lives of the women (heterosexuality is tied with subjugation). In "The Women Men Don't See," Ruth and Althea depart the planet, as Ruth views women's lib as a fundamentally hopeless endeavor (women will always be subjugated). "Love is the Plan" complicates this by imagining a gender structure that is infinitely more fluid, where the masculine and feminine, the male and female, contort and blend into each other. Even if gender is fluid among these creatures, however, the fundamental structures of heterosexuality demonstrate a bleak natural order, resulting in death and pain. A modern tragedy of gender difference: the two-sex system, where male and female exist as opposites who crave each other, can only end in the destruction of

⁴¹ Hollinger, "(Re)Reading Queerly" 27.

one. Wendy Pearson writes: "In a not dissimilar way, purely feminist readings of "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" may not account for, or have any interest in, either the necessary lesbianism of these future women or the construction of the Andys as transgendered"⁴². If heterosexual men and women are incapable of ever surviving together, since Tiptree has identified men as "violent, domineering, patriarchal, and sexually aggressive"⁴³, then queerness (lesbianism) is seen not as a loving and powerful truth but as the natural consequence of an inability to survive through heterosexuality. Lesbianism here may be the result of the fundamental incompatibility of men and women rather than just a sexuality. In "The Women Men Don't See," Ruth *and* Don conflate being a "man-hater" with being a lesbian, drawing attention to the idea of political or separatist lesbianism rather than a natural inclination towards same-sex attraction.

In "Houston, Houston," Andy as a "trans" character represents an androgynized feminine figure, essentially a man without the violent tendencies. This suggests that heterosexual relationships are only impossible because of the existing "dichotomy," which divides men and women into both opposites and enemies. If we understand heterosexuality as a pairing within the binary (violence/submission), Tiptree may be suggesting the possibility of "queer" but technically heterosexual relationships, which have emerged from the essentialist binary. Even so, "queer" heterosexual relationships like the one represented between Moggadeet and Lililoo end in pain and death. This suggests that heterosexual relationships, even ones that actively attempt to deny the violent/submissive binary, are doomed by nature of their inequality. This too draws

⁴² Pearson, "On Science Fiction and Queer Theory," 11.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 1.

from Tiptree's theoretical suggestions about essentialism, entertaining the hypothetical possibility of escape through denaturalizing gender difference, but never confirming it as realistic.

According to Marleen Barr in "The Females Do the Fathering!": James Tiptree's Male Matriarchs and Adult Human Gametes," the ending of "Love is the Plan," where Lililoo is unable to resist her biological imperative and murders Moggadeet, "imagines an extreme reversal of the negative implications which link female biology to female destiny."⁴⁴ The heterosexual bind, which in Tiptree's other stories is used to demonstrate how heterosexual relationships end in female subjugation or decapitation, utilizes the alien body to execute a drastic reversal of the typical sexual roles. This draws into question the nature of typical romantic (gothic) dramas throughout history, which are thematically enhanced by the tragic destruction of the female. "Love is the Plan" suggests that even in an alien species that bears little resemblance to humanity, the biological difference between men and women, and the entrapment in those bodies, prevents true connection or love to the point that any co-existence, let alone romantic involvement, results in pain and death. The eradication of male power rather than female power at the end of "Love is the Plan" does not seek to glorify feminine power; it remains tragic, and makes the statement that regardless of the biological imperative at work, or the queer nature of the relationship, male and female members of a species can *never* connect or coexists. This is an amplified exploration of Tiptree's claim that "love can only exist between equals," and illuminates Sheldon's

⁴⁴ Barr, "The Females Do the Fathering!," 46.

thought process behind homosexuality as a necessary aspect of both separatism and survival.

Homosexuality, Cloning, and Motherhood

Sara Wasson's article "Love in the Time of Cloning: Science Fiction of Transgressive Kinship" explores the link between homosexuality and human cloning and illuminates the conceptual and theoretical work behind "Houston." Wasson specifically seeks to examine the issue of homosexuality as "love for the same" from the viewpoint of cloning, and furthermore to understand how the concept of cloning complicates the idea of kinship.

"Houston, Houston, do you Read?" tells the story of a futuristic Earth populated only by women, who reproduce through cloning and therefore have lines of direct kinship, all deriving from the original 11,000 genotypes. Because of the nature of these connections, all the women view each other as "sisters;" the cloning establishes an inherent kinship between all members of Earth. This may provide the utopian "answer" to Sheldon's feelings of detachment towards women; she feels as though they are *not* her kin- and suggests that this may be as a result of existing under patriarchal subjugation; without men, women would be able to relate easier, since they are not forced into binary category. The genetic descendants of the original women share their names and their career inclinations: for example, the "Connie" type is drawn towards farming while the "Judy" type is technologically inclined. They can, however, cross over or experience "unnatural" inclinations for their type, which references back to Sheldon's theory that certain behaviors exist depending on sex (even depending on chromosome), but can be experienced by either gender.

Wasson investigates the idea of homosexuality as contextualized by the clone: “Mechanical reproduction is not second-rate: there is nothing wrong with becoming a clone ..., striving to be sexy through mimicry, or commodifying one's life, body, and work. To consider replication degrading is, literally, homophobic: afraid of the same.”⁴⁵ The idea of sexuality substantiated by mimicry defends Sheldon’s theory that love is only possible between equals, and suggests that a taboo for same-sex love is informed by the idea that affection for the same is somehow degrading. Wasson claims that “...discomfort with and disparagement of homosexuality stems from its double transgression of, first, combining identification and desire, and second, complicating the gender affiliations of the two.”⁴⁶ . In “Houston, Houston,” Bud Geirr’s perception that all the women would be entirely sexually unfulfilled without men (which fuels his violent fantasies of sexual domination), is substantiated by a homophobic ideal which suggests that lesbianism/love for the same is insufficient or unable to compare to heterosexuality.

Wasson discusses “Houston, Houston,” drawing attention to the kinship embodied through text; the women of the future Earth possess a large anthology memoir from their genetic line. They use this book as a way to figure out what they might be inclined towards, or “what might be interesting to try.” This book provides a framework for paths or types in life, without enforcing any specific roles, which speaks to a hopeful concept of kinship connections between women that could exist unaffected by men. Homophobic perspectives that reduce same-sex relationships to narcissistic attraction disregard the possibility that a clone could be distinct from the root: rather

⁴⁵ Wasson, “Love in the Time of Cloning,” 131.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 132.

than a direct replication of their ancestors, the women in “Houston, Houston” come from a single root but are allowed to branch out into their own interests. This flexibility is restricted in modern heterosexual relationships by the expectation that the feminine be a direct mirror to the masculine.

The theory of homosexuality and lesbian utopia operating in “Houston, Houston,” is also discussed in “Homotopia? Or What’s Behind a Prefix?” by Wendy Pearson. A feminist utopia supposes a complete male genocide, and therefore requires homosexual love to become the sexual norm. Given Sheldon’s belief that women should for the most part engage in gay sex, except for the purposes of reproduction, the world in “Houston, Houston” creates a resolution to this problem: men aren’t even needed for reproduction, allowing for women to engage only in sex for pleasure.

If the women in “Houston” are all sisters in that they come from the original 11,000 genotypes, then there is some implication of incest in any sexual relationships. Incest can in some ways be extended into homosexuality as “love for the same,” especially given Sheldon’s work in “Letters to my Sister,” where she mentions infantilism as bad, but “incest, necrophilia, and homosexuality” as being in the same (peaceable, housebroken) category.⁴⁷ Cloning, incest, and homosexuality are all conflated, therefore lesbianism and kinship are tightly related. This all stems from the concept that “love can only exist between equals,” or that homosexuality may be a healthier love because it indicates a kinship or understanding that an essentialist binary would never allow.

⁴⁷ Sheldon, “Letters to My Sister,” n.p.

Pearson, in “Homotopia”, also discusses the fact that in a female utopia, all women are by necessity lesbians; but it is also impossible to be a lesbian if there are no men, since same-sex love the only love. It isn’t until relatively late in her life that Sheldon began to truly confront her homosexuality; she communicates with Joanna Russ about it (after her “reveal”), saying that “women and girls” have always been at the forefront of her sexual desire. The homotopia of “Houston,” where homosexuality is the fundamental natural state, would help Sheldon to reconcile her feelings and feel more kinship with her fellow women. Her idea of lesbian sex, however, usually involves her having a penis to facilitate penetrative sex. This plays into Tiptree’s continued complication of boundary-lines surrounding queerness and heterosexuality, implying that queer relationships have the potential to be technically heterosexual, or vice versa. The idea of a homosexual/lesbian utopia also addresses the idea of political lesbianism or lesbian separatism, or the idea of selecting lesbianism as a feminist avenue rather than as a natural inclination.

Conclusions

The main themes explored in Tiptree's short stories are the concept of the feminine as alien or Other, biological essentialism (in terms of biologically defined traits that are natural or specific to either sex), and sexuality, specifically homosexuality as liberation. Overall, Tiptree resists any definitive statements about what is natural or unnatural, but rather entertains various possibilities and explores their consequences. In this way, Tiptree's queer theory remains nebulous and inquisitive, and the science fiction genre allows for this curiosity.

While Tiptree's published work can easily be read through queer theory while self-contained, investigation into Sheldon's personal diaries and essays can illuminate some of the queer theoretical work, while also identifying the stakes for Tiptree's queer reinterpretations as deeply personal. With knowledge of Sheldon's biographical history and her personal ideations, readers can come to understand Tiptree as not just a penname but a masculine extension of Sheldon's identity: this concept allows the reader to infer why Tiptree was so passionately interested in interrogating biological essentialism and gendered relationships.

Access to Sheldon's personal materials, including diaries, can help readers understand how Sheldon conceptualized her own gender, and how that extended out into her wider gender theory. These personal theses line up with much of the gender theory in Tiptree's published works, substantiating and illuminating important themes such as perspectives on essentialism and sexuality. While the stories can stand alone as theoretical investigations into gender and queer theory, the personal works provide insight into the personal stakes behind Tiptree's attempts to understand his own gender

and place in the world. Given the information provided by the unpublished work, the conclusion can be reached that Tiptree experienced a complicated relationship with his own gender, and his work with essentialism and sexuality was not just theoretical but also a way to better understand his own feelings. The penname Tiptree as an expression of Sheldon's desire for "adrenalinized genitalia" illuminates Tiptree's potential trans identity. If we understand Tiptree as trans, the complicated understanding of essentialism becomes clearer: Sheldon identified certain aspects of her personality as definitively masculine, but still felt completely confined within her female body. Sheldon's confidence in the existence of masculine traits operating in a feminine body, and her insistence that homosexual relationships are not only normal but necessary for fulfillment, were not just theoretical but represented an attempt to understand and articulate her own feelings. Sheldon's statement as early as 1935 that "I am no damned woman wasteful god not to have made me a man," substantiates these ideas.

Through these short stories, Tiptree developed feminist and queer theory that interrogate gender difference, sexuality, and transness. His use of male protagonists not only supports his identity as the male Tiptree, but also provides a unique perspective on feminist discourse that operates simultaneously from a masculine and a feminine perspective. This complicates the nature of men and women, their existence together and apart, and science fiction possibilities for liberation, cooperation, separatism, and more. In her biography, Julie Phillips writes:

He [Tiptree] wrote about women's alienation in a world of men, and was held up as an example of a male feminist, a man who understood... his stories were so full of action, abstract thought, and desire for women that everyone knew they were dealing with a man. In 1975, in an introduction to a book of Tiptree's short stories, Robert Silverberg wrote of his friend, "It has been suggested that

Tiptree is female, a theory I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing.⁴⁸ (5)

Tiptree allowed for Sheldon to occupy a social and intellectual space that reflected her ideal masculine body and mind, which was repressed in her everyday identity. Tiptree is widely understood as a queer writer, with much speculation about his sexuality, but with little consideration for the fact that his articulated fantasies about having a penis were more than figurative. By comparing Tiptree's published works to his unpublished, personal pieces, more space is allowed for understandings of Tiptree as queer, gender-non-conforming, and gender-complex.

⁴⁸ Phillips, "The Double Life of Alice B Sheldon," 5

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