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"Let the Past Teach You": An Ecocritical Analysis of Medievalism in Selected Works of Twentieth-Century United States Science Fiction

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to analyze the presence of medievalism in selected works of United States science fiction written in the twentieth century. Medievalism is here understood as the practice invested in any reception and use of elements tied to the Middle Ages. The analysis is conducted through a posthumanist ecocritical perspective. The study intends to shed light on the way in which Western temporalities inform and shape attitudes and practices toward the nonhuman realm. The modes in which the West and especially the US position themselves toward the Middle Ages are under particular scrutiny here. Medievalist works of science fiction can in fact reveal Western dominant temporal perceptions. Such works, however, can also unsettle hegemonic temporalities. Narratives that present diverging modes of temporal perception may produce different understandings of the relation between the past and the present, the medieval and the modern, nature and culture, and humans and nonhumans. This study aims to demonstrate that medievalism can both reinforce and unsettle anthropocentric worldviews. The corpus of texts that have been selected for this analysis comprises Edgar Rice Burroughs's *A Princess of Mars* (1917), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and Octavia E. Butler's Earthseed series (1993-1998). The study embraces an intersectional approach. Such an approach takes into account intersecting systems of oppression that affect negatively not only the nonhuman realm, but also marginalized sections of the human population.

Keywords: medievalism, science fiction, US twentieth-century literature, ecocriticism, posthumanism