For the Love of Literature

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (July 2021)

Life is a hierarchical workshop.
Only death is democratic.
—Nicolás Gómez-Dávila, Scholia to an Implicit Text

Francois Truffaut's 1966 film adaptation of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* begins with a striking narration of the credits. The premise is simple: empty chatter becomes the natural medium of communication in an illiterate culture.

Fahrenheit 451 is an oppressive world where books and reading are outlawed, and everyone has a huge wall unit that is used by the state to control its sheepish subjects.

When the book burners arrive at a high-rise with orders to burn books, we are immediately struck by the stark and vulgar aesthetics of the buildings that are a staple of totalitarian countries – globs of cement and concrete, unimaginative, state-commissioned modernism.

The moral lesson of the novel and film is conveyed through the moral/ spiritual sterility and ugliness of daily life in the dystopia that is *Fahrenheit 451*.

Is there a correlation between cellular telephones – miniature wall units that people carry with them 24-7 – and functional illiterates who shun the art of reading as a thing of the past?

Michael Crichton, *Sphere*

In *Sphere*, Michael Crichton explores an alien spaceship. While the idea of a spaceship that has crashed landed on Earth appears a bit hackneyed, there is an element of surprise in store for readers, as is often the case in Crichton's novels.

The sphere is an American spaceship from the future – three hundred years in the future. After going through a blackhole, the spaceship returns to present-day America. *Sphere* was published in 1986.

Sphere is reminiscent of Lem's novel *Solaris*, where a planet acts like a brain that controls the memories of people who come into its vicinity; a Nietzschean nightmare of ever-recurring past.

The American Navy assembles a group of professionals to investigate. These include biologists, chemists and one psychologist to descend one thousand feet below the Pacific Ocean to explore a mysterious craft that is discovered at the bottom of the ocean. The objective of the expedition is to enter the craft, which hitherto has kept its secrets from Navy divers.

Placing plot conventions and intricacies aside, *Sphere* is a work that deals with human psychology. Natural psychology, not the theoretical and academic make-work cottage industry.

Natural psychology is akin to aspects of human nature that, through the passage of time become encrusted, as it were, in the fabric of daily life in man's quest to decipher human reality; inscriptions that are merely the acceptance of common sense.

Sphere explores qualitative phenomena that frame human reality, which often go unnoticed until people find themselves in an existential dead-end and moral bankruptcy. Qualitative essences, Crichton suggests, are the pillars of human values.

Stanislaw Lew, *Solaris*

Polish writer, Stanislaw Lem (1921-2006), published *Solaris* in 1961. The novel was translated into English in 1970. *Solaris* was made into a film by the Russian cineaste Andrei Tarkovsky in 1972.

Solaris is an interesting work, at least it starts as such, ultimately sliding into an arrogant diatribe against human ignorance that attempts to prove the author's overarching intelligence.

Lem was known to disparage American science fiction writers. He boasted of having a 185 IQ. The latter is the sophomoric kind of thing that self-indulgent, socially inept high school students engage in. Normally, in literary criticism anecdotal information about writers is considered idiosyncratic. Yet Lem's boast comes through in *Solaris*.

Lem's sardonic attitude toward man is on display in *Solaris* in vivid fashion. Of the four characters in the novel, three are scientists who are consumed by what I refer to as the smartness principle: scientists who deem themselves smarter than everyone else, including readers of science fiction. The

smartness principle is an abrasive component of *Solaris'* narration.

One of the scientists is an alleged genius, though reclusive to the point of embracing anti-social behavior. Another leads a dysfunctional life and has no redeeming qualities – only smartness. The third has committed suicide.

Kelvin – the protagonist – is not as smart as the other three. He is awe-stricken by the smartness of the ocean-brain. Kelvin's ex-girlfriend, Rheya, who committed suicide years earlier, is a figment of Kelvin's guilt-ridden imagination.

Throughout a large portion of *Solaris*, the narrator engages in theories about the nature of the ocean-brain's ability to manifest guilt. The ocean-brain resembles a cosmic psychoanalyst; it is not God or an alien, instead a head shrinker.

The ocean-brain is a Freudian cosmic force that brings to the fore negative psychological emotions in human beings. One wonders, if not for the scientists who visit Solaris – terribly dysfunctional people to begin with – what purpose would the ocean-brain psychoanalyst serve?

Lem's atheism and lowly conception of human beings is the point of *Solaris*. None of the characters possess redemptive qualities. The situations that mark the plot of the novel are purposeless and indicative of postmodern moral-spiritual atrophy.

Solaris offers readers a less than stellar portrayal of human beings; the narrator laments that man has not evolved enough to understand a cosmic ocean-brain. How do we know this? Scientists tell us so.

Ernest Hemingway, *Islands in the Stream*

Islands in the Stream was published posthumously. The novel is

truly a tale of three novelettes strung together: “Bimini,” “Cuba” and “At Sea.” The themes and pathos of the second and third sections are radically different from the first.

In the first section, the protagonist, a painter named Thomas Hudson, entertains his three young sons who come to stay with him for the summer. Hudson is a two-time divorcée who lives and paints in Bimini, one of the islands of the Bahamas.

Islands in the Stream refers to the Gulf Stream, a current of water in the Caribbean that runs from the Florida Straits through the Bahamas and north along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. The novel employs many of the staple ingredients of Hemingway’s novels: fishing, drinking and brawling.

Hemingway may surprise causal readers with his poignant and painful look at one man’s tragedy. The first section of the novel is heart-wrenching.

Readers may get the impression that Hudson, who lives alone, is happy painting and drinking. When Hemingway scratches beneath the surface of this painter’s seemingly contented existence, we find a a man who has profound regret. Hudson spends a lot of time reminiscing about the mistakes he made with his two ex-wives, the promise and loss of love, and how he misses his three sons.

Hudson is a worldly, level-headed man who understands the failings of other men. His life revolves around fishing and sharing drinks with his equally lonely friends.

Few writers are as proficient as Hemingway in combining mundane and lyrical aspects of life with a frank depiction of the inner life. There is much of Hemingway – the man – in Hudson’s character. Hemingway is a fine example of writing about what one knows.

How many writers can turn swiftly from scenes of swimming and

fishing in the Bahamas to discussions of literature and writers? In one scene, Hudson discusses Joyce and Balzac with his sons. His son Tom says that he can't understand the language Joyce uses in *Ulysses*. Hudson answers: "That's not for boys…It isn't really. You couldn't understand it and you shouldn't try to. Really. You have to wait till you're older."1

The novel contains a striking portrayal of deep-sea fishing. His youngest son, Davy, battles a Swordfish that is over one-thousand pounds. The scene turns from the excitement of a young boy who hooks a massive fish to a bloody confrontation; the father having to decide if the boy can handle the fish, and in the process ruin the boy's confidence.

Arguably, "Cuba" and "At Sea" aren't as interesting as the first part of the novel. In "Cuba" Hemingway offers the reader a glimpse of his life and friends in Cuba before the takeover of communism in 1959. Cat lovers will enjoy this section. Others might find the long passages detailing cat behavior monotonous.

Section three, "At Sea" describes the secretive exploits of a group of men during World War II who patrol the coast of Cuba and the Bahamas searching for German U-boats. This section alerts readers to this little-known history of World War II. This part of the novel will be of interest to firearms aficionados.

1 Ernest Hemingway, *Islands in the Stream*. (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1970), 67.

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