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Robotics in Issac Asimov's Short Story Collection *I, Robot*

V. Kani Selvi, M.A., M.Phil.



Science Fiction

Literature enables man to escape out of the make-believe existence of everyday life and to forget for a while the grim realities of life. It prepares man to face the odds of life cheerfully and with courage. With the rapid development of science and technology, science fiction has become popular in the modern ages. It deals with the conflicts that arise out of the impact of scientific discoveries on the Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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future life of humanity. It can inoculate against ignorance, premature advancement of research, and the depersonalizing threat of technological change.

Thus, Science Fiction is the literature that celebrates not merely Science and Technology but also technology driven social change as a permanent revolution as the final and most inexorable foe of all fixed power relationships everywhere. The most powerful Science Fiction manages to move beyond prophecies of future technological change. Speculative technology, time travel, alien races, intelligent robots, gene-engineering, space travel, experimental medicine, psionic abilities, dimensional portals or scientific principles contribute to the plot or background.

Isaac Asimov



Issac Asimov, a Russian born American, is an eminent writer. He is considered as the father of modern Science Fiction. He is a 'Hardcore' writer in the sense that basically and professionally he is a scientist and in the treatment of materials he is deeply committed to the values of the disciplines of Science.

Asimov's writing career spanned more than forty five years. He has produced more than five hundred published books of nearly every type of fiction

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and non-fiction. He believed that his most enduring contributions would be his ‘Three Laws of Robotics’ and the Foundation series. Furthermore, the Oxford English Dictionary credits his Science Fiction for introducing the words *Positronic*, *Psychohistory* and *Robotics* into the English language. Asimov of sixties and seventies could be regarded as the Touch Stone of Science Fiction.

Asimov is certainly the leader of Science Fiction. Under his vision, Science Fiction was saved from being degenerated into a spy-sex story in hyperspace. As a free thinker, Asimov treats Science Fiction as a pool where ideas are expressed with unrestricted intellectual freedom. In the hands of Asimov, Science Fiction has acquired a very significant form in the extrapolation of human reality. In its use of narrative resources and elements, he is unique in employing techniques, idiosyncratic to the genre. He has created merry, positive and highly readable books and stories.

Two Facets of Science Fiction

Science Fiction has two facets one pointing to the world of fantasy and other to reality. The glory of man is that he is not bounded by reality. Man travels in fantastic world. Asimov’s Science Fiction portrays those fantastic worlds where man finds it difficult to be human and longs for regenerations and enlightenment.

I, Robot

Asimov embraced technological innovation and dominated the field of robotics in literature. In *I, Robot* the nature and principles of robots are examined in detail probably for the first time. The role of technology, robotics and the human theme of making the right decisions are key themes in Issac Asimov’s *I, Robot*. It presents these nine stories as a series of vignettes related by Dr. Susan Calvin, an elderly “Robopsychologist” who is being interviewed in conjunction with her impending retirement from the mega-corporation US Robot and Mechanical Men, Inc.

Characters in *I, Robot*

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I, Robot talks about how the world is when robots are invented. In the beginning, there is a little girl with a robot she loves. Her parents take the robot away from her, and she misses him. Later the robot saves her life, so her parents let her have the robot again. The next part of the book talks about the scientists and robots at U. S. Robots. The robots are constantly malfunctioning, and the scientists have to figure out the robots' problems.

The next part of the book talks about an election and how people think a candidate is a robot, and how he proves he isn't. The book ends with a scientist talking with the "World Coordinator", and how they figure out that robots are basically controlling how the human race is going to turn out. Thus, it is a robot anthology that shows us the relation between human beings and robots from the time when computers basically took over the control of economy, progress and future of mankind. The vision of robots in reality is far different from the vision of robots in Science Fiction.

Asimov's robot "Robbie" is a nursemaid to a young girl. "Speedy" is a miner sent to an outer space excavation. "Cutie" is a robot with a day job at a space station, but becomes fascinated with philosophical and religious issues, evolving into a skeptical thinker with a Cartesian orientation. "Dave" is an adult, "Head of Family" robot collapses under stress, analogous to a psychotic. "Herbie" is a telepath who is capable of turning the tables on them, and severely perturbing the life of human beings. Stephen Byerley is a robot undistinguishable from man, who becomes City Mayor in a career that will lead him to become President of the Federated Regions of Earth.

Career Choices for Robots – Three Laws of Robotics

As these examples make clear, robots had a wide range of career choices open to them in the Asimovian scheme of things. But one doesn't read Science Fiction in hopes of finding future science - no matter what you may have been told. If Asimov's predictions of technological evolution have gaping holes, his mind is analytic and rigorous in the highest degree as he constructs his plots. Three Laws of Robotics are part of the background color of *I, Robot*, but actually they play a central role in the nine stories.

When a robot is malfunctioning, or some robotic matter needs to be investigated or remediate, the Three Laws come into play. They often push the story forward or resolve the main complications in the plot. The Three Laws are stretched to the breaking point, leaving one or more human protagonists to solve the resulting mystery. The most unique feature of his robots are the Three Laws of Robotics hardwired in the robots' positronic brains, which all robots must obey, and which ensure that robots don't turn against their creators.

Reconfiguration of Reality

The greatness of Asimov's books does not derive from their chemistry or physics or genetic engineering, but in the writer's visionary reconfiguration of our conceptions of the real. Reality and fantasy are intertwined. The world of fantasy is relived in the world of reality as it once before may be restoring the earth to its original state. Robots were a part of our fantasy world long before we had the technology to actually produce them.

Each story is easily digestible as it provides a variety of plots and characters. It explores different aspects of the philosophical ramifications of the rise of intelligent robots. The stories in *I, Robot* are connected thematically and chronologically by detailing the development of robots:

from the beginning, when the poor robots couldn't speak, to the end, when they stand between mankind and destruction.

(“The Evitable Conflict” 224)

It gives the clear sequence of the nine ages of robots which leads from the doll of the first to the god of the last story.

Contrary to Reality, But Making the Characters Real

The settings for Science Fiction are often contrary to known reality. The setting is in the future, so it is interesting for readers to see what the future is like. Asimov made the story so that readers feel the things going on in the book can happen anytime now,

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because of the modern setting. The stories take place during the period from 1998 to 2052. The plot is set in a robotic factory, the fictional corporation U. S. Robots and Mechanical Men, Inc.

The cast of characters in *I, Robot* is remarkable, with lots of protagonists, all of them having their own qualities. In the delineation of characters, Asimov endows them with the qualities to see things clearly and consistently and connectedly in a scientific manner. There are also a variety of robots with different personalities that Asimov created, such as Robbie, a caring robot, and Cutie, a robot who thinks humans are inferior. Asimov did a brilliant job creating the characters and making them extremely realistic.

With the three simple directives, Asimov changed our perception of robots forever when he formulated the laws governing their behavior. He concentrates on the reality of the situation to provide the obstacles. On the whole, *I, Robot* changes our vision of the future and the overall outlook on robots.

Futuristic Changes in Human Life

I, Robot depicts the changes in human life with the incoming of robots. Here are stories of robots gone mad, mind-reading robots, robots with a sense of humor, robot politicians and robots that secretly run the world. All the stories are narrated with Asimov's trademark, (i.e.) dramatic blend of science fact and science fiction. Asimov created a realistic view of possible future, one in which humans and robots are worked together to create a more harmonious environment. Robots could very well become a huge part of lives soon. Though *I, Robot* was written fifty years ago, it accurately foretells the future.

To conclude, *I, Robot* declares Asimov as a spokesman for Science Fiction culture through his craftsmanship of mind-blowing robots and immutable Three Laws of Robotics. He makes the readers visualize the future world filled with robots (reality) through his fantasy world.

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