Social Science Fiction: It’s Importance in the Works of Isaac Asimov.

SOCIAL SCIENCE FICTION?

PART I
Science fiction is a term familiar to many people. This is especially true due to the
tremendous influence of television. But the term "social science fiction," although not
heard too often, is a term is descriptive of most of today's science fiction literature.

But what does it mean?

Social science fiction is the term given to literature "which is concerned with the impact of
scientific advance upon human beings"(1). It is to be set apart from the adventure or
"gadget" science fiction which is characterized by simplistic plots and flat characters.
Social science fiction is concerned with the problems presented to humanity by
technology and science.

This theme can be seen readily throughout many of Isaac Asimov's science fiction works.
But, Mr. Asimov was not too concerned with the problems of atomic power or
overpopulation when he was three years old.

Asimov was born in Russia in the year 1920. He and his parents immigrated to the United
States when Isaac was three years old. Upon arriving, young Asimov wasted little time in
beginning his writing career. He had taught himself to read and by the age of seven, he
had his own library card (2). But, of the two books he was allowed to take out, only one of
them could be fiction. Thus, Isaac took a liking to many science and history books, and his
amazingly retentive memory allowed him to recall many of the things he read.

Because of his excellent reading habits and his superb memory, Asimov was considered
brilliant when he entered school. A grade of 95 from a person capable of 100 was
considered a poor grade by Isaac's father. Although he was an excellent student, Asimov
was frequently bored by school. In order to escape boredom, he would create stories in
class for himself and others. Although he did this verbally at first, he began writing down
his stories at the age of eleven. Yet these in-class activities did not distract him from his
schoolwork. He graduated the Boys' High School in Brooklyn when he was fifteen. From
there, he went on to receive a B.S. from Colombia University in 1939, a Masters in 1941,
and then a Ph.D. in 1948.(3) Asimov says he would have continued his studies had it not
been for World War II.

Asimov's first exposure to science fiction occurred one day while he was working in his
father's candy store. Although Asimov worked in this store all the way up into his college
studies, he still found time for reading. But his father forbade Isaac from reading the dime
novels on the shelves in his store. One day, though, a magazine appeared on the shelf entitled, "Science Wonder Stories." Since the word science was included in the name, young Asimov was permitted to read it (4).

Although Asimov would become a famous writer in his own time, he did not think of writing as a career in those pressured times. He wanted to complete his college studies and then begin a career in chemistry. Writing, to him, was an amusement.

But his father did not think that way. His father saw the potential of becoming a great writer. Although Asimov had only submitted two of his stories at the time, his father felt that deserved some credit. Credit in the form of Asimov's first typewriter.

But it was not until 1938 that Asimov would get his first story in print. In that year, the magazine known as "Astounding Stories" changed its name to "Astounding Science Fiction" and its editor to John Campbell. Asimov wrote a number of letters to the magazine, letters that were published. Encouraged by his father, Asimov submitted a manuscript to Campbell in person. The editor met with Asimov, looked over the manuscript, and rejected it. But Asimov did not take the rejection as a negative experience, but rather a positive one. Although he continued to send stories in to Campbell, the editor kept sending him rejections. Asimov finally sold his first story. But it was not to "Astounding Science Fiction," but rather to another magazine titled, "Amazing Stories."

Asimov continued writing for the next eleven years in order to pay his way through college. During this time, he joined a science fiction fan club titled, "The Futurians"(5. He was able to pay his way up through his Ph.D. in biochemistry. But it was not until his first novel, Pebble in the Sky, was published in 1950 that he began to look at his writing skills with seriousness.

In 1957, Asimov realized that all he really wanted to do was write (6). But it was in 1958 though, that he quit his job as associate professor at Boston University School of Medicine, and took up writing as a career. Asimov felt that he had made the right decision not only for the increase in his salary, but also for "the feeling of absolute delight that washed over me as I did so."

But, since his move to become a full time writer, Asimov has had little time between 1960 and 1981 to write much in the area of science fiction. Despite his prodigious output of non-fiction stories, he has only had time to write a few short stories and only one commissioned novel. It has only been in the past few years that he has begun to take up science fiction writing again.
As has been mentioned, many of Asimov's works deal in the area of social science fiction. The effects of technology and science are an important theme in many of his short stories and novels and can be seen readily. Asimov also presents the problems of present day society to us by paralleling these problems in a future society.

Asimov's first novel ever published, Pebble in the Sky, dealt with issues that were prevalent during the late '40's and has begun to reappear in today's society, prejudice.

Pebble in the Sky is set in the far future. Earth has been plagued with atomic war and is now a decaying, radioactive husk of a planet. Man has spread out and colonized the galaxy. The beginnings of a Galactic Empire are at hand. On Earth live the outcasts of the galactic society. The Outer Worlds, as the colonies are called, look upon the people of Earth with disgust, seeing them as "repulsive carriers of radioactivity." This prejudice towards the people remaining on Earth stretches even into the bureaucracy: soldiers are employed to keep the Earth people from immigrating to the other worlds of the galaxy.

The "hero" of the novel is named Joseph Schwartz. Schwartz is a retired tailor from the Chicago of 1942 accidentally transported to the distant future from a nuclear accident. Schwartz, although, is not the typical hero in that his actions are to uphold truth, justice, and honor, but instead, he is motivated by crankiness and a sense of independence. It is only until the end of the novel does he sees any connection between his life and the galactic crisis at hand that motivates him towards the side of good.

Another form of prejudice can be seen in another of Asimov's novels, The Currents of Space. In this novel, the setting is once again the far distant future. The Galactic Empire is on the verge of being initiated. The conflict at hand is an agrarian planet named Florina. This planet is under controversy because it is the only planet capable of growing a highly prized and sought after fiber called kyrt.

In parallel to the South of pre-Civil War days, Florina is established as having human slaves to tend the crops, with the slaves being controlled by men called Townsmen. These townsmen are, in turn, responsible to the governor of the planet, Sark. The prejudice shown towards the slaves is extremely obvious and is seen throughout the entire book.

Another, more subtle theme is the theme of the relationship between idealism and fanaticism. A Townsman, who has been plotting to overthrow his superiors, the Squires of Sark, is motivated by his idealistic goals of justice. But, his idealism slowly turns into fanaticism as he maims an innocent farmer to keep his plans secret. Asimov uses this twisted form of idealism to show us that idealism in extreme is fanaticism.
Probably the stories for which Asimov is most famous are his robot stories. Nearly all of these stories deal with the reaction of humanity towards new advances in technology and science. *I, Robot*, in particular stressed these themes.

*I, Robot* is a collection of some of Asimov's finest robot stories. The first story in the collection, "Robbie" tells of a little girl, her parents, and her nursemaid, Robbie the robot. To the little girl, Robbie is a playmate, a friend. To her mother, the robot was, at first, an escape from housework, but now is a possible threat to her daughter's mental health. To the little girl's father, the robot is a tool which he knows can never harm his daughter or anyone else in the family. Being Asimov's first robot story, the plot and characters are rather simple. The different viewpoints on technology can be clearly seen: the mother who is wary of technology and would rather see her daughter with real friends, the little girl's father who sees technology as a boon to mankind, and the little girl who is entirely ignorant of the fact that Robbie is a robot and would rather think of it as a friend.

The next story, "Runaround" takes place on the planet Mercury. Being another world, Asimov has chosen two new characters, George Powell and Michael Donovan. These two are field-testers for the largest robot manufacturer, U.S. Robotics and Mechanical Men Inc. They are on Mercury to test out a new series of robot specially designed to go out onto the hot surface of Mercury and retrieve a valuable element, selenium. Asimov plays on our intellect as he poses some interesting problems to Powell and Donovan which are finally resolved by Asimov's famous Three Laws of Robotics:

1. A robot cannot harm a human nor through inaction allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey all orders given to it by human beings except where such orders would contradict with the first.
3. A robot must preserve itself except where such action would contradict the first or second laws.

To Donovan and Powell, technology is their job. They do not view it with any other opinion except that it is their way to earn money. The next two stories, "Reason" and "Catch that Rabbit" are Asimov's continued experimentation with his Three Laws. Still featuring Donovan and Powell in different situations faced with different problems. Asimov's next story, entitled "Liar!" deals with a robot that has the ability to read minds.

Here, we get to see Asimov's representation of a non-stereotypical female character, Susan Calvin. Calvin is one of U.S. Robotics leading "robot psychologists." She is the one who most readily understands the way robots function and how they will react. Asimov portrays her in this story as being very cold and hostile as she drives the mind reading robot insane.

The next three stories, "Little Lost Robot", "Escape!". And "Evidence" are more of Asimov's experimentation on his Three Laws of Robotics, with each story getting successively more complicated and containing an increasingly more difficult problem to solve.
The last story in the book, "The Evitable Conflict" is set in the future. The world has been united in peace into one governing unit. The planet has been divided into four Planetary Regions. In these days, the planet's economic markets are controlled by "Machines," huge computers that monitor Earth's economic systems. But now, the Machines are producing imperfect results, which cause minor economic upsets. But, after some theorizing, the characters come up with the solution that the First Law of Robotics has been altered to read, "A robot shall not harm humanity, or through inaction allow humanity to harm itself."

Probably the most important theme presented in this story though is the idea, "Is man really in control?"(9) In the story, the Machines have taken over and now control Earth's economic resources. Asimov tells us that if we are not careful, our own technology may take us over.

PART III
"One significant aspect of the series (The Foundation Trilogy) is Asimov's invention of psychohistory; with its implications for determinism and free will. Psychohistory was put together out of psychology, sociology, and history - not hard sciences, which Campbell had a reputation for preferring, but at best soft sciences: a behavioral science, a social science, and a discipline that has difficulty deciding whether to define itself as a social science or a humanity.... Psychohistory is the art of prediction projected as a science; later it might have been called futurology or futuristic" [10].

James Gunn points out in his book, Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction, that Asimov's creativity in devising a new science is crucial to the popularity of Asimov's most famous series, The Foundation Trilogy. I tend to agree with Gunn. If it were not for Asimov's psychohistory, The Foundation Trilogy would end up being no more than a parallel to Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. It is the idea of predicting future events with precise mathematical equations that adds a touch of suspense to the books. Although most critics are in agreement with this viewpoint, there are some who tend to disagree:

"Nevertheless, it is difficult to put one's finger on precisely what element or elements so fascinate readers. From just about any formal perspective, The Foundation Trilogy is seriously flawed. The characters are undifferentiated and one-dimensional. Stylistically, the novels are disasters, and Asimov's ear for dialogue is simply atrocious. The characters speak with a monotonous rhythm and impoverished vocabulary characteristic of American teenagers' popular reading during the Forties and Fifties; the few exceptions are no better - e.g. the Mule, who, in disguise of the Clown, speaks a pseudo-archaic courtly dialect, or Lord Dorwin who speaks like Elmer Fudd, or the archetypal Jewish mother who can say, "So shut your mouth, Pappa. Into you anybody could bump." The distinctive vocabulary traits are as a rule ludicrous: God! Is replaced by Galaxy!, and when a
character really wants to express his disgust or anger, he cries "Son-of-a--Spacer!" or "I don't care an electron!" To describe the characters' annoyance, arrogance, or bitterness, Asimov uses again and again one favorite adjective or adverb, sardonic(ly):


Evidently, all people in all time periods will be sardonic. In the twelve-thousandth year after the founding of the First Galactic Empire, characters still use terms drawn from the western - e.g. "Lynching party" - and slogans imported from the political slang of the times, e.g. "Lick-spittle clique of appeasers out of City Hall."(11)

As can be seen, Charles Elkins did not think too highly of Asimov's series which won him and Hugo award for "the best all-time science fiction series."(12) Although I believe that Elkins went a bit too far with criticism, he does have some valid points. Asimov did not spend too much time on developing the characters and instead spent time on working them into the plot. And the language, did, at times, get ludicrous. Especially with angry protagonists running about exclaiming: "Great Galaxy!"

But overall, I felt The Foundation Trilogy was a finely done piece of work by Asimov. Considering that it was originally written as serialized short stories for science fiction "pulp magazines," Asimov has done a fine job integrating it all into one continuous story.

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(3) Fiedler, pg. 3.

(4) Fiedler, pg. 4.


(8) Asimov, pg. 84.


(10) Gunn, pg. 38.


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