

**THE FUSION OF SCIENCE FICTION AND THE DETECTIVE STORY: A
STUDY OF THE ROBOTIC DETECTIVE TRILOGY
OF ISAAC ASIMOV**

The present study focuses on the robotic detective trilogy of Isaac Asimov which consists of The Caves of Steel (1954), The Naked Sun (1957) and The Robots of Dawn (1983). A unique combination of science fiction and the classical detective story, the trilogy which was begun in 1954, but completed only in 1983, effectively disproved John W. Campbell Jr.'s categorical statement that it was impossible to combine the two genres, since science fiction permitted methods of committing and solving crimes that were incompatible with the demands of the classical detective story. Though science fiction detective stories *had* been written earlier, they fell mainly into two categories: stories in which the detective (usually a Private Investigator) tracked his quarry from planet to planet; and stories in which the solution hinged either on genuine scientific knowledge or on futuristic scientific gadgets. While the first category used the detective story - often a simple manhunt - to depict and explore new worlds of the future; the second did not give the reader much chance to solve the mystery, since the solution depended either on information and details that he might not know, or on an imagined future technology. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that it is only Asimov who has successfully combined the two genres, by placing a classical detective plot in a genuine science fiction setting. The purpose of this study is to analyze these three novels in order to discover, whether the combination has resulted in any changes to either of the genres, and if so, to determine the nature of these changes and the reasons for them.

Chapter I - The Grand Master - states the purpose of the thesis, and gives an overview of the work and achievement of Isaac Asimov, which is remarkable both in terms of its quantity and quality. The chapter shows the wide range of his interests and his writing, with special emphasis on three specific areas - the Foundation series, the robotic stories and the Three Laws of Robotics, and the detective trilogy chosen for study. The Foundation series is discussed in terms of its two distinctive features. The first is the notion of *psychohistory*. The brainchild of Hari Seldon, it is a purely mathematical science that deals with patterns of mass human behaviour, and will reduce to a thousand years, the thirty thousand years of misery and anarchy between the fall of the First, and the rise of the Second Galactic Empire. The second is the notion of an all-human galaxy, which Asimov chose to depict for specific personal and technical reasons. This is followed by a general analysis of the robot stories, touching upon the Frankenstein complex, Asimov's significantly different depiction of the robot, and the Three Laws of Robotics. The chapter then looks at the robotic detective novels, which feature - for the first time - a detective pair, of whom one is human while the other is a robot. In these novels, Elijah Baley of the New York City Police is teamed with R. Daneel Olivaw, a humanoid robot built on the Outer World of Aurora. The chapter concludes with a concise description of Asimov's fictionally inclusive universe, the features that characterize his writing; and his position and importance in the field of science fiction.

Chapter II - The Changeling in the Cradle - examines in some detail the nature and history of science fiction, and is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the

nature and features of science fiction and takes a look at the different ways in which science fiction has been described and categorized. It also includes a concise account of the contribution of Darko Suvin to the critical theory of science fiction. The second section traces the history of science fiction. Beginning with a brief account of Jules Verne and H.G Wells, it traces the history of science fiction from the Gernsback era, through the Campbell era and the New Wave, to more recent writing such as cyberpunk, alternate histories, steampunk and military sf. This is followed by a third section which examines in some detail the preoccupations of science fiction in terms of its major themes and motifs. Thus this section looks at the depiction of other worlds, utopias and dystopias, spaceships, aliens, artificial intelligence and robots. The significance of these recurring motifs is also examined. The chapter concludes with a brief look at the relationship between science fiction and the mainstream, and the criteria by which science fiction is to be judged.

Chapter III - Crime and Punishment - is a study of detective fiction, and begins with a short general description of the genre. This is followed by a history of detective fiction; with special emphasis on Edgar Allan Poe, the 'Founding Father' of the genre, who provided the basic plot structures and devices of detective fiction. The genre reached a peak with the Golden Age, when the classical detective story emerged as a tightly structured formula, bound by rules and conventions that permitted of no deviation, because it was generally believed that adherence to these guaranteed high quality. This classical formula is closely analyzed in terms of its constituent elements: setting, the crime, the criminal, the suspects, the detective and the companion figure, the police, and

the primacy of plot which is achieved at the expense of character. This section also includes a brief summary of the specific features of the classical detective story as laid down by Ronald Knox and S.S. Van Dine. The emergence of the classical detective story in England was paralleled in the United States by the uniquely American manifestation of the hardboiled detective story. In the 1950s we see the appearance of the police procedural, created by Ed McBain, followed by a proliferation of the genre into a variety of forms that are permutations and variations of its basic formula. All these forms are examined in terms of their structures and features, as well as in the significance of such stories to individuals and to societies. The chapter concludes with a brief summing up of the distinctive features of science fiction and detective fiction, in the light of which Asimov's robotic detective trilogy will be studied.

The next two chapters take a close look at the novels chosen for study. **Chapter IV - Creating New Worlds** - deals with the science fiction aspects of the three novels. The chapter specifically looks at the criteria by which science fiction - especially the depiction of future worlds - is to be judged. The chapter begins with a brief summary and explanation of Darko Suvin's theory of "cognitive estrangement" and the "novum." Setting is admittedly vital to science fiction and distinguishes it from mainstream fiction. While mainstream writers concentrate on the people and take the setting for granted, the first and major preoccupation of the science fiction writer is the creation of new worlds. The first part of the chapter describes the setting, and analyses the social structures of the three worlds on which the novels are set - Earth, Solaria and Aurora. The second part of the chapter focuses on the novum of the robot and the relationship between man and the

robot, which ultimately proves to be mutually beneficial, since it brings about positive changes in both. The chapter also looks at the long-term science fiction concerns of the novels - the future of the human race, and the role of the robot in realizing this future

Chapter V - The Plot's the Thing... - deals with the structure of the detective mysteries in the three novels. While the first part of the chapter deals with plot, the second part deals with character. In the first novel, Baley and Daneel investigate the death of a Spacer in Spacetown, just outside the City of New York. In the second, they investigate the murder of the Solarian fetologist, Rikaine Delamarre; while in the third, they deal with the entirely new crime of 'robotocide' on the planet of Aurora. The three plots are examined in the light of the features of the formula as spelt out at the end of Chapter III, and reveal their typically Asimovian quality of the 'puzzle' plot. Asimov has a clear predilection for the closed-room scenario, and favours plots with either one or no suspects at all. Though the investigation of the crime falls into the regular pattern of the detective story, there are literally no clues to follow. Yet Asimov never fails to produce the proverbial rabbit out of his conjurer's hat. Though there seems to be no possible solution to the mysteries, Asimov produces an entirely logical solution, which however, is revealed only in private. All the three novels have two solutions: the official one that satisfies the requirements of the authorities, and the private one, which is the actual truth. It is the closure of the novels that distinguishes them, and sets them apart from the classical detective story.

Detective fiction generally sacrifices character to plot, and the ‘absence’ of character was not only taken for granted, but actively encouraged in Golden Age detective fiction. However, in these novels, Asimov chooses to explore human personality and relationships, seeing them as the direct result of social and cultural conditioning. Central to the interest in character is the growing relationship between Man (Baley) and the Robot (Daneel and Giskard); and Baley’s relationship with Gladia. This interest in character is also a deliberate departure from the tradition of the classical detective story, and is linked to the science fiction setting of the novels. Asimov clearly shows that even in a science fiction detective story, a good plot, and complex setting do not preclude credible characterization.

The **Conclusion** presents the findings of this study. The narrative structures of science fiction and detective fiction are examined and compared in the light of the statements of Stableford, Suvin and Nudelman. In the light of these criteria, it is clear that the trilogy shows no departure from the structure of the science fiction genre. However, the study shows that at several points - some of which are very significant - Asimov deviates from the structure of the classical detective story. This difference is seen mainly in the area of closure, which is extremely important in detective fiction. While “formalizing endings” are essential to detective fiction, good science fiction is always open-ended: closure is impossible, because the science fiction universe is a continuous one. It is obvious that while the basic structure of the novels is that of detective fiction, their underlying structure is essentially that of science fiction. Though it is the detective story that holds the interest of the reader, it finally makes way for the more important science fictional

concerns of the trilogy - the colonization of the Galaxy; the relationship between man and the robot and the viability of the C/Fe culture. Asimov's historical universe is complete and whole, and contains all his fiction. In this world, Baley has an important part to play: he is both detective-hero and pioneer-hero, the lynchpin of the movement for the colonization of space. In the Asimovian universe, the adventure is just beginning, and ahead, in a distant future, lies the Galactic Empire of the Foundation series. Though it is true that the unique appeal of these novels arises out of the combined pleasure of the detective story embedded in the science fiction story, in the larger perspective of the ultimate destiny of the human race, the detective story is little more than the means to an end. An all-time first, the novels are a testimony to Asimov's undisputed skill and literary imagination.