Science Fiction Storytelling and Identity: Seeing the Human Through Android Eyes

Yvonne A. De La Cruz

"Individual science fiction stories may seem as trivial as ever to the blinder critics and philosophers of today - but the core of science fiction, its essence has become crucial to our salvation if we are to be saved at all."

-Isaac Asimov

For a long as we can remember, storytelling has been an integral part of communication between people. It is and has been a way to connect with others through ideas, thoughts, and dreams. Stories began as an oral tradition, meshing moral lessons with entertainment; however, as human technology advanced and the invention of writing came about, the storytelling format began to change. Oral narrative transformed into written stories, and those writings have become the center of our storytelling process. Books and screenplays are now the foundation of the stories we tell, while televised media and feature films are the hub of our entertainment pleasure.

As we look at the advancement of technology alongside the storytelling element, it's hard to ignore the role that both science and Science Fiction play within story plot lines. Just as science has become partner in a vital relationship with technological advancement, Science Fiction has become an important aspect of storytelling. Together, science and Science Fiction enhance both the moralistic teaching and the entertainment aspects within storytelling by addressing new concepts developed in technology and by providing further insights into human behavior. As Science Fiction writers incorporate science into their narratives, they attempt a search for answers beyond any boundaries that might limit explanations concerning humans and human behavior. Thus, Science Fiction writers have triggered a human fascination with questions that we may have pertaining to human existence: Why are we here? What is our purpose? What makes humans… well, humans? The answers we seek are not easy to come by.

As time has passed, our questions concerning human existence have come to the forefront of Science Fiction storytelling. The idea of molding and shaping a human-like figure with human consciousness and intelligence has become prominent in the examination of the human psyche in order to study our human selves. Although the creation of artificial life is a theme currently existent in Science Fiction, the concept was first addressed by Mary Shelley in her classic novel, *Frankenstein*. Shelley's novel attempts to highlight both the glories and the flaws of humanity by placing a human man in the position of God and, thereby, having him become a Creator of Life. Yet, the novel also places emphasis on human behavior—such as anger and compassion—and questions pertaining to whether human behavior is a learned trait or an innate quality. If a childlike creation is able to learn human behavior, does that make him, her, or it human? This question is represented throughout Shelley's story, and it has become such a prevalent question that Science Fiction writers have adopted it as a major theme. The use of this idea in order to attempt to define humanity and human behavior has continued in Science Fiction works like Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* and Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. Both of these novels are

examples of how Science Fiction begins to venture into further territories of human inquiry. Writers and readers of Science Fiction would agree that the genre provides a higher level of examination to the study of the human psyche because there are no boundaries placed within the realm of Science Fiction. The concepts that are highlighted in both Asimov's and Dick's novels are extensively addressed in the re-imagined television show *Battlestar Galactica*. In this series, attempts to define humanity and search for the answers to individual existence are furthered by the creation of Artificial Intelligence and by humanity's response to that creation. My research shows that Science Fiction as a genre addresses the limits of human experience by using the creation and development of Artificial Intelligence to define humanity. I analyze these novels of Shelley, Asimov, and Dick, their movie counterparts, and the television show *Battlestar Galactica*, using the parent/child dynamic and Asimov's notion of a "Frankenstein Complex" as a lens to view and explain human behavior.

The parent/child dynamic is prevalent in all of the storylines I discuss, and it is a concept that may help us to better understand ourselves whether we are placed in the position of parent—as an authority figure—or child. We may also better identify with the creation of A.I. if we see ourselves as the child in our parent/child relationship with God. For example, the parent/child dynamic between the Creator and his Creation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one of the foremost themes that helps us to reflect on our own relationship with God, because not only does Dr. Frankenstein place himself in the role of Creator and God, but he also becomes father to the child he has created. This relationship is identified through the "monster"'s continual referrals to Dr. Frankenstein as his father. Therefore, being children of God ourselves, we can identify with the monster who searches for the love and acceptance of his creator. Shelley's novel also presents the concept of the "Frankenstein Complex," which is a common theme in Asimov's work, and it is also an idea that has continued into many Science Fiction novels that have followed. The "Frankenstein Complex" is a term used to describe the eminent fear that humanity has of artificial creation. Whether it is from the fear that God (our parent in the parent/child relationship) will punish us for our sins of creation or because we are afraid that our creations will trump our power and establish a position above us, the "Frankenstein Complex" seems to drive our behavior concerning the creation of Artificial Intelligence. Here, it is argued that that when the parent/child dynamic is coupled with the "Frankenstein Complex," it can be used as a effective lens through which to view all of the works I discuss.

Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* is a collection of short stories based on the creation of non-human looking robots with added intelligence, which makes them more human-like. This collection also presents the concept of the "Frankenstein Complex" in almost every storyline. Asimov also attempts to define humanness as he furthers the idea of man's role as the creator of Artificial Intelligence. However, he seems to be highlighting the benefits rather than the dangers of Artificial Intelligence for all mankind. The first story in the collection, "Robbie," depicts a powerful relationship between a nursemaid robot—named Robbie after its model number RB—and a young girl. The mother of the girl becomes fearful of her child's loving and playful relationship with the robot (perhaps because she herself does not have such a relationship with her daughter) and persuades her husband to get rid of the child's playmate. It is clear that Robbie's nursemaid attributes benefit the little girl, and once Robbie is gone, she refuses to make any further efforts toward a loving

relationship. Here, the "Frankenstein Complex" is evident within the girl's mother, who fears Robbie because he seems to be taking on a human role. Also, Asimov presents a struggle in the parent/child dynamic by first placing Robbie in the position of parent over the little girl and then having the mother attempt to re-assert her role as parent over her child. By eliminating Robbie from the family, the mother establishes her power of authority over Robbie; thereby, reducing his role of parent to that of a child as well. At the same time, Asimov is intimating that the downfall of humanity comes not from the literal destruction of humanity at the hands of Artificial Intelligence, but by humanity's own hands because of human's distrust of other beings, coupled with the need to assert control over beings they deem inferior. Asimov's ideas about A.I. development in concert with the possible downfall of humanity are twofold: that robots are not "monsters that [would] destroy their creators, because… people who build robots will also know enough to build safeguards into them"; and, that when the time comes, if "robots are sufficiently intelligent to replace" humanity, then they should (Ingersoll 68-69). All of these concepts are clearly present throughout the remainder of Asimov's collection.

In Alex Proyas' film adaptation of *I, Robot*, he successfully incorporates all of the ideas that exist in the storylines of Asimov's collection, and he incorporates the concepts of parent/child dynamic along with the "Frankenstein Complex" are quite successfully. There is clearly a parent/child relationship evident between the robot Sonny and his creator Dr. Lanning, while Detective Del Spooner thoroughly represents the "Frankenstein Complex." However, at the end of the movie, the need for humans to maintain authority and control over the lesser beings—the robots—refers back to the idea that this storyline—as with most Science Fiction storylines nowadays—is highly geared around the "Frankenstein Complex." The film is different than most of Asimov's stories where some of the humans allow the A.I. to assert control of a situation because it is still completing the task given, and there seems to be no reason to change the system that is working. In essence, Proyas' film depicts a different undertone throughout the movie than that which appears in Asimov's short story collection: in the written stories there are no humans trying to play God in order to assert control over the A.I. creations, and most of the humans are able to find a symbiotic balance in living with their creations.

Philip K. Dick's novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, provides a clear example of the parent/child dynamic with the creators of Artificial Intelligence—identified as the Rosen Association—beginning to morph into a God-like entity. Dick's work raises the question of humanness by portraying the Nexus-6 androids, or "Andys," (known as Replicants in the *Blade Runner* movie version) as biologically human in representation with the ability to learn and adapt to human behavior. We are able to identify with these androids due to our own parent/child relationship with God, and also because their reasoning for revolt is equivalent to our basic human instinct: the want and need for survival. The "Frankenstein Complex" is fully flushed out in this story because the protagonist, Deckard, is hired to "retire"—that is, kill—the "Andys" because of their revolt. Here, the "Andys" are attempting to gain a higher status in their parent/child relationship, yet humans are attempting to maintain their control, or dominance, over those they see as lesser beings. Dick's novel seems to highlight the looming disaster that may come when humans begin to play God, reversing their role into position as Creator, thus changing their place in the parent/child dynamic.

The film production of Dick's novel, *Blade Runner*—directed by Ridley Scott—furthers the attempt to define humanity through the creation of A.I. by using and emphasizing the parent/child dynamic and the "Frankenstein Complex," which are the most apparent themes in the novel. The goal of the protagonist Deckard is to find and kill all of the renegade Replicants, who rebel because they are attempting to avoid being terminated. In one scene, Roy Batty—the leader of the rebel Replicants—appears to his Creator—the CEO of the Tyrell Corporation—to ask for more life. When this request is denied, Batty kills his creator, an act that clearly represents Man's destruction of God. In both of these major plot lines, Scott has utilized both the parent/child dynamic and the "Frankenstein Complex" in order to highlight the question of what it means to be human. By the end of the movie, Deckard begins to sympathize with one Replicant, Rachel, with whom he has a romantic interlude and falls in love. There is also an implication at the end that Deckard himself is a Replicant, a notion that plays with the idea that human qualities and behaviors may not only belong to humans if these qualities and behaviors are able to be lived and learned by other beings such as Artificial Intelligence.

All of these novels place focus on man's assumption that he can create life and take it away as he sees fit, which is a concept that is at the hub of the parent/child relationship I discuss. Also, these works begin to highlight the question as to whether or not Artificial Intelligence is an "intelligent design" to begin with. Both Shelley's and Dick's works seem to point a shameful finger towards those who choose to venture onto the path of creating Artificial Intelligence, thereby, highlighting the "Frankenstein Complex." They seem to shape a cloud of condemnation hovering over the Creators' decisions to create life and then destroy it. Asimov, on the other hand, seems to be inviting the idea of A.I. creation as a positive and enlightening journey towards answering the questions we all have about life. Even though Asimov does warn about the possibilities of disaster that are feasible upon creating artificial life, he points out that these dangers are only made possible through human fears pertaining to A.I. development. Either way, all of these storytellers, both in the written works and their cinematic versions, depict the destruction of humanity as the fault of humans themselves.

As Science Fiction has become more and more popular, the concept of Artificial Intelligence development has become an increasingly prevalent storyline. There have been many movies, television shows, and even anime films that have brought the idea of A.I. and android creation to the attention of the average movie/television viewer. Film trilogies like The Matrix and The Terminator utilize the "Frankenstein Complex" to further concerns about the creation and development of A.I.—particularly with the creation of robots and androids—and their effect on the evolution of humanity. These storylines also take into account the parent/child dynamic as humanity (the parent) attempts to assert control over Artificial Intelligence (the child). In the anime film, *Vexille*, the parent/child dynamic is furthered when one scientist creates a virus that would transform all humans into Cyborgs. His reasoning behind this transformation is to give humans eternal life. However, near the end of the film, it is clear that the scientist's true motive for the creation of the Cyborg virus is to gain control over all humanity. Thus, the parent—the scientist—is attempting to assert ultimate control over his children—humans who have been transformed into Cyborgs. By simply viewing these and other storylines that involve the creation of Artificial Intelligence, on any level, it is clear that we are fascinated by the clockworks of humanity. Our want and need to find out what makes humans human has come to the forefront of Science Fiction

storytelling, and we are using this genre to help us flush out those answers.

In many of its recent storylines, the re-imagined television series *Battlestar Galactica*, broadens the scope of the examination we are undertaking. The basis of this series is the creation of A.I.—also known as the Cylons—and the destruction of humanity at the hands of that creation. The center of this story is much like many other Science Fiction storylines that involve A.I. and android creation. Man creates Cylon as help to relieve him of the stresses of everyday life, Cylon gains consciousness and rebels because it no longer wants to be a slave to man. However, the re-imagined *Battlestar* Galactica begins to take up further questions about the definition of humanity by incorporating both religious theology and philosophy. The Cylons, who now look like flesh and blood human beings, return to the twelve planets of Kobol—the designated home base of humanity—after a forty-year leave of absence in order to destroy "humanity's children" because it is the "will of God." (*Battlestar Galactica: The Miniseries*). The Cylons entire reasoning for the destruction of man stems from a belief in a one true God, while the humans still believe in a polytheistic faith based on many of the Greek Gods we are familiar with. This small seed planted within the storyline grows and changes the story as it evolves from season to season. The Cylons are looked at from a viewer's perspective as becoming more and more human-like because we are able to identify with some of the human qualities that are inherent in the Cylons' belief system. With this concept in mind, we are able to follow the human learning capabilities of one Cylon—Caprica 6—as she transforms from an obvious machine (she breaks the neck of an infant in the miniseries in order to observe the fragility of human life) to a loving and understanding human-like being (as she loves another human being, becomes pregnant, and learns to appreciate all life no matter if human or Cylon). Sharon Agathon, another human-like Cylon, also evolves as the show progresses because of her love for her husband—human Karl "Helo" Agathon—and the daughter that both share. Evidently, it is through love and becoming an individual apart from the rest of the Cylon singularity that both Caprica and Sharon are able to develop their human-like qualities (Moore 109). Through the examination of Caprica, Sharon, and other Cylon models like them, it is clear that the series' creators have enabled themselves to explore a new area of A.I. creation that might answer questions of what it means to be human. Although this series unmistakably uses the "Frankenstein Complex" and the parent/child dynamic in the opening episodes of the series, later on it is able to venture closer to the definition of humanity by adding religious theology and philosophy to the storyline.

As Science Fiction continues to incorporate the creation and development of Artificial Intelligence into its storylines, the definition of what it means to be human will change and grow as well. The storytellers of this type of storyline are clearly interested in coming to an ultimate definition of this question. It is interesting to see that the creators of all of these stories have used the "Frankenstein Complex" and the parent/child dynamic to place emphasis on our human fears and control issues in order to attempt to define humanity, and perhaps as this type of storyline develops in Science Fiction, more writers and storytellers will incorporate other concepts—just as the writers of *Battlestar Galactica* have—in order to encourage attempts at a more clear definition. Even so, as the actual creation of Artificial Intelligence develops and changes, these questions have become even more relevant. The storylines concerning A.I. are not only pertinent because we wish to define ourselvesm but we also find interest in this topic because the possibility of

creating A.I. with the ability to adapt to and learn human behavior is very real. With A.I. technology advances almost literally knocking on our front door, fear of losing control has become omnipresent. Although Science Fiction is in fact fiction, there is a popular belief that the science behind it may become very real. It is in this light that we ask ourselves if the fears we have are plausible and whether we are able to assert the control we would want to have over our creations. In the end, perhaps the biggest fear we have, as we give in to our fears and loosen our control over A.I. creations, comes to this: If we create A.I. in human likeness and consciousness, do we threaten to rid ourselves of the very things that make us human in the first place? Perhaps the loss of our place in humanity is the reason why we hold onto our fears and attempt to keep that control.

Works Cited

Battlestar Galactica: The Miniseries. Dir. Michael Rymer. Perf. Edward James Olmos, Mary McDonnell, Katee Sackhoff, Jamie Bamber, James Callis, Tricia Helfer, Grace Parks, Michael Hogan. DVD. Sci Fi Channel, 2003. Film.

Ingersoll, Earl G., Isaac Asimov, Gregory Fitzgerald, Jack Wolf, Joshua Duberman, and Robert Philmus. "A Conversation with Isaac Asimov." Science Fiction Studies Mar 1987: 68-77. JSTOR. University Library. California State University, Stanislaus. Web.9 Feb 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239795>.

Moore, Robert W.. ""To Be a Person": Sharon Agathon and the Social Expression of Individuality." Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica. Ed. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2008.

Works Consulted

Asimov, Isaac. Asimov's Chronology of Science and Discovery. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.

Asimov, Isaac. I, Robot. New York: Bantam Dell, 1950.

Asimov, Isaac, and Karen A. Frenkel. Robots: Machines in Man's Image. New York: Harmony Books, 1985.

Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy. Ed. Josef Steiff and Tristan D. Tamplin. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2008.

Bladerunner. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, Edward James Olmos, Darryl Hannah. DVD. Warner Bros, 1982.

Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica. Ed. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2008.

Dick, Phillip K.. Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep. New York: Balllantine Books, 1968.

Frankenstein. Dir. James Whale. Perf. Colin Clive, Mae Clark, John Boles, Boris Karloff. DVD. Universal Pictures, 1931.

Goss, Theodore and John Paul Riquelme. "From Superhuman to Posthuman: The Gothic Technological Imaginary in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis." Modern Fiction Studies 2007: 434-459. Project Muse. MUSE. California State University, Stanislaus. 29 Mar 2008 <http://muse.jhu.edu>.

Gunn, James. Isaac Asimov, the Foundations of Science Fiction. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2005.

Herman, William E., and Bryan K. Herman. "Humanistic Themes in Science Fiction: An Interview with David A. Kyle." The Humanistic Psychologist 2006: 263-280. Project Muse. MUSE. California State University, Stanislaus. 12 Apr 2008 <http://muse.jhu.edu>.

I, Robot. Dir. Alex Proyas. Perf. Will Smith, Bridget Moynahan, Alan Tudyk, James Cromwell. DVD. 20th Century Fox, 2004.

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Dir. Kenneth Branaugh. Perf. Robert De Niro, Kenneth Branaugh, Helena Bonhan Carter, Aiden Quinn, Ian Holm. DVD. TriStar Pictures, 1994.

Pinker, Steven. "Toward A Consilient Study of Literature." Philosophy and Literature Apr 2007: 162-178. Project Muse. MUSE. California State University, Stanislaus. 12 Apr 2008 <http://muse.jhu.edu>.

Robots, Androids, and Mechanical Odditites: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick. Ed. Patricia S. Warrick and Martin H. Greenberg. Southern Illinois University Press, 1984.

Science Fiction Writers: Critical Studies of the Major Authors from Early Nineteenth Century to the Present Day. Ed. E. F. Bleiler. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003.

So Say We All: An Unauthorized Collection of Thoughts and Opinions on Battlestar Galactica. Ed. Richard Hatch. Dallas: Benbella Books, Inc., 2006.