

I, Robot Study Guide

I, Robot by Isaac Asimov

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Plot Summary

I Robot is the first in the Robot Series by Isaac Asimov. In this novel, Asimov discusses the three laws of robotics and how they have influenced the development of robots over the years. The novel begins with an interview by a reporter of Susan Calvin, a robopsychologist who specializes in making robots seem more human. Susan tells the reporter several stories about robots that illustrate these rules and how they have impacted the development and actions of robots over the years. I Robot is a futuristic novel that leaves the reader with a vision of a future that could one day be reality.

Susan Calvin is a robopsychologist who has worked with US Robot and Mechanical Men most of her career. Now in her seventies, Susan Calvin is being interviewed by a reporter about her experiences with robots. Susan begins the interview with a story about a robot named Robbie who was a nursemaid to a young girl in the early nineties. This robot was very beloved by the child it was purchased to care for, but the neighbors, and even the child's mother, felt the robot could be a danger. For this reason, the robot is sold back to Us Robot and Mechanical Men. However, the child has such a hard time without the robot that the father arranges for the child to see the robot again. During this visit, the child falls into danger and the robot saves her, causing the mother to relent and allow the robot to return to the family.

Dr. Calvin continues by describing how robots were banned from earth so US Robot began using robots to work on space colonies on other planets. In one story, Dr. Calvin describes how orders caused one robot to become unbalanced, acting drunk, because of a conflict between the second and third laws. A researcher had to place himself in mortal peril to break the robot out of its state. Later, on another space station, a robot became so self-aware that it began to believe that it was created by a machine rather than man despite a demonstration that showed the robot the truth. This belief, however, did not interfere with the three laws, so researchers decided to leave the robot alone.

Dr. Calvin also discusses the development of a robot who could read minds. This robot told the scientists working with it what it knew about them and the people around them. However, it was soon discovered that this robot had the capacity to lie. In order to adhere to the first law, the robot would tell the scientists what they wanted to hear rather than the truth to protect their feelings.

As technology and the use of robots increased, so did the difficulties experienced with robots. Dr. Calvin recalls one situation in which the first law was modified in certain robots in order to allow them to behave in a specific way. This modification allowed one robot to hide among others, making it important that it be identified and removed before this modification could be discovered. Dr. Calvin had to trick the robot by placing herself in danger and using a radiation field that only this specific robot would know was not dangerous.

When Dr. Calvin returned to earth after this experiment, she learned that a rival company had attempted to feed their superbrain a specific problem that caused it to



malfunction and now they were offering US Robots a deal to use their superbrain robot. Due to the fact that they believed their brain to be superior, US Robots fed the problem to their brain who in turn built a spaceship that could leap through time. To do this, the robot had to disregard the first law to a certain degree, something Dr. Calvin gave it permission to do.

Dr. Calvin continues the interview by telling the reporter about a politician she once had the occasion to know. This politician was accused by his opponent of being a robot. The man refused to go along with any of the tests his opponent insisted he submit to based on the argument of personal privacy. However, the day of the election this politician hit a man in public after he was accused once again of being a robot, apparently proving he was not a robot as a robot could not hurt a human. However, Dr. Calvin would later theorize that the man the politician hit was also a robot.

Dr. Calvin ends her story by relating a problem the politician, by now the World Coordinator, was having with the five superbrain robots that aided in governing the world. These robots appeared to making, or influencing, mistakes in each of the territories. The World Coordinator investigated each of these mistakes and came to the conclusion that humans were attempting to influence the superbrains to further the influence of anti-robotic groups. The World Coordinator was set to outlaw these groups when Dr. Calvin explained to him that the robots had caused this mistakes themselves to prevent future economic problems with the anti-robotic groups, thus adhering to the first law of robotics to protect humans at all costs, in this case by preventing future wars.

Dr. Calvin's story illustrates for the reporter, and reader, the development and adherence to the three laws of robotics.



Introduction and Chapter 1, Robbie

Summary

Introduction.

A reporter is sitting down with Dr. Susan Calvin, a robopsychologist who has worked for US Robots and Mechanical Men for more than forty years. The reporter is interested in the development and use of robots over Dr. Calvin's lifetime.

Chapter 1, Robbie

Robbie is an early robot developed in the nineties. Robbie cannot speak, but he looks humanoid. Robbie is a nursemaid to a little girl named Gloria. However, Gloria's mother dislikes Gloria's attachment to Robbie and the distrust of Robbie she has noticed among the neighbors. For this reason, Gloria's mother finally convinces her husband to sell Robbie back to US Robots. Gloria is devastated to find her robot gone. When Gloria refuses to break out of her depression after Robbie's departure, her mother decides to plan a trip to New York. Gloria becomes convinced that this trip is to enlist help in finding Robbie. Gloria's parents try to keep Gloria busy on this trip, but she will not stop thinking about Robbie. Finally, Gloria's father suggests a tour of US Robots in the hope that seeing robots being manufactured will break Gloria's obsession with Robbie. However, when they arrive in an assembly room, Gloria is thrilled to see Robbie there. Gloria rushes into the area to greet Robbie, unaware that a tractor is lumbering toward her. Robbie saves Gloria from the danger. Reluctantly, Gloria's mother agrees to take the robot back home again.

Analysis

The premise of this novel is that a doctor who has been working with robots all her career is giving an interview to a reporter about the evolution of robots. This is made clear in the introduction at the beginning of the novel. The doctor's first story is about an early humanoid robot who was a nursemaid to a child. This story illustrates how the child and the robot interacted with one another. More importantly, however, this story illustrates the first law of robotics, the rule that states that a robot cannot cause the death of, or cause by inaction the death of, a human. This story illustrates this rule in two ways. First, the robot is something that is unusual and feared in the community, but it is very gentle with the child. Second, the robot actually saves the child's life when she runs out in front of an automated tractor.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Susan Calvin? Why is she being interviewed? What is the purpose of the information gained in this interview?



Discussion Question 2

Who is Robbie? What is his purpose? How does Gloria feel about Robbie? How does Gloria's mother feel about Robbie? For what reason?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the family return Robbie to US Robots? How does Gloria respond to this change? Why does the family go to New York? What is the result of this visit?

Vocabulary

Contempt, shrieked, blindly, horrified, lumbering, senses, companion, immediately, precision, expression, undignified, appearance, formidable, engineered, passionate, opposite, iota, consequently.



Chapter 2, Roundabout

Summary

Two scientists in the development department, Gregory Powell and Michael Donovan, often handle the harder cases of problems with the robots. As an example, Dr. Calvin tells the reporter of a time when Powell and Donovan were on a space station on Mercury after robots were banned on Earth and began to be used as work robots in space. This station was to be a mining project that had once been abandoned but with the use of robots was to be reopened. To begin their work, Powell and Donovan needed to collect some selenium to power the photo bank cells that power the station. Powell sent a robot to do the collection, the only robot they had with them, but it had failed to return.

Powell and Donovan discuss what might have happened to the robot and the fact that the surface of the planet was too hot for them to venture after it themselves. Powell remembers some older model robots that were stored on the station when it was abandoned. Powell and Donovan wake the robots with small power packs and direct them to take them through the tunnels to a place close to where the robot was. These robots, who require a human rider to move, took them out to a place less than three miles from where the other robot, Speedy, was. As Powell and Donovan approach Speedy, they realize he is stuck in a loop because of a conflict with the second and third laws of robotics. The selenium pool contains something dangerous that could cause Speedy harm, the third law, but he has been instructed to get the selenium urgently, the second law. For this reason, Powell and Donovan have to find a way to change the balance between these two laws to break Speedy out of his loop. To do this, Powell places himself in danger, creating a conflict of the first law and causing Speedy to break out of the loop.

Analysis

This chapter illustrates the second and third laws of robotics. The second law states that a robot cannot disobey a human unless the order conflicts with the first law. The third law states that a robot cannot place himself in danger unless the situation conflicts with the first or second law. In this case, Powell has instructed the robot that he must retrieve the selenium, but volcanic activity in the selenium pool is dangerous to the robot. Therefore, the robot falls into a loop where it cannot obey his orders, but it cannot disobey them either. It is a conflict that the scientists could not have foreseen, but one that they can work to avoid in the future.

Discussion Question 1

Who are Powell and Donovan? What is their job? Why are they on Mercury?



Discussion Question 2

What are the three laws of robotics? Why are they important?

Discussion Question 3

How does Powell break Speedy from the fatal loop he is in? Why does he go about it as he does? What danger could there have been had Speedy not responded the way Powell thought he would?

Vocabulary

Savagely, expressed, bitterness, advisability, techniques, ruin, demand, signal, anxiety, monstrous, selenium, mutual, robot, sublevels, primitive, powered, diaphragm, reasonable, controls, phonograph, medieval, machines, succinctly.



Chapter 3, Reason

Summary

Six months later, Powell and Donovan were on Solar Station 5. Their job was to train a new robot, the QT-1, to work the Beam Director on the station. This robot was new and proved to have a unique ability that others did not have, a self-awareness that caused conflict between it and the humans. This robot, called Cutie, believed it was created by the Beam Director, or Master as Cutie called it, despite Powell and Donovan's attempts to prove otherwise. At first, Powell and Donovan tried to convince Cutie otherwise, but then Cutie took control of the other robots by convincing them of the same thing. In fact, the other robots came to call Cutie the Prophet. Then, just hours before a storm was to hit Earth, Cutie locked Powell and Donovan in a room for trying to interfere with the Master. Powell and Donovan were frantic because they would need to control the Beam Director closely during the storm, but they were relieved to discover that Cutie had done the job better than they could have. Powell convinced Donovan that it did not matter what Cutie believed as long as he performed his job well.

Analysis

This story that Dr. Calvin tells the reporter illustrates how the robot became self-aware and began asking questions about its creation and its existence. This particular robot would not believe that a human could have created it because it was too complex for a human to create. Despite this, the robot performed its job well, causing Powell and Donovan to decide that as long as the thought processes did not interfere with the robot's performance, it did not matter what it believed.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Cutie? What is his purpose? Why does he not believe humans to be capable of creating him?

Discussion Question 2

Why are Powell and Donovan on Solar Station 5? What is their job there? What causes them difficulties in this job?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Cutie referred to as the Prophet by the other robots? What does this suggest about the gullibility of the other robots? What does this suggest about the possibility of robots being influenced by other robots?

Vocabulary

Intuition, intend, reason, absolute, mathematical, protection, metallic, seriousness, supple, mystification, satisfactory, improbable, observation, directed, emptiness, comparison, motionless, particular, incandescent.



Chapter 4, Catch that Rabbit

Summary

Dr. Calvin tells a story of how Donovan and Powell, six months later, found themselves on an asteroid overseeing a new kind of robot, a main robot with six subordinate robots, that worked in the mines on the asteroid. Donovan had noticed that when he was not observing these robots, they would often not return with any ore as they were supposed to do. However, Donovan could not figure out why this was. Powell suggested that they watch the robots through a remote screen called a visiplat, so they could see what the problem might be. After watching for nearly ten days, they could not see one specific thing that was causing the problem, only that the robot seemed to act oddly after dangerous events took place. Finally Donovan and Powell decided to sneak into the tunnels to observe the robots in an emergency situation that they will create to see what happens. This plan backfired, however, when a cave in caused them to become trapped. Powell realized what was causing the problems with the robots when he shot one of the robots to get the main robot's attention after the cave in. The robot was overtaxed by having to control so many robots at once.

Analysis

This chapter touches again on the second and third laws of robotics. The robot that was the brain of the six other subordinates became disoriented whenever it had to give an order to protect the six robots while doing an activity ordered by the humans. This robot would do odd things, like marching the other robots in a strange formation whenever this happened. Powell realized that it was overtaxing the main robot to have to give this order to six subordinates, so he removed one and the main robot immediately snapped out of its disorientation. This seems to show some of the limits of the robots under the laws of robotics.

Discussion Question 1

What is the purpose of a robot with six subsidiary robots? What is it used for on the asteroid? How might this type of robot be helpful?

Discussion Question 2

How does Dave, the robot, begin malfunctioning? What do Powell and Donovan think the problem is with Dave? Why can they not immediately fix the problem?



Discussion Question 3

How do Powell and Donovan find themselves trapped in a cave in? How does this situation help Powell figure out what the problem is with Dave and his subsidiary robots? How does he fix it?

Vocabulary

Amusement, mentioned, psychiatric, amazingly, blueprints, queer, circuits, supervision, simultaneously, subsidiaries, mobilized, initiative, destroyed, decreases, personal, emergencies, commission, transmitter.



Chapter 5, Liar

Summary

Dr. Calvin begins telling the reporter stories about her own experiences with robots. In her first story, Dr. Calvin tells the reporter about a robot that could read minds. Dr. Calvin is a part of a team that includes research department leader, Alfred Lanning, mathematician Peter Bogert, and Us Robot officer Milton Ashe. The team is trying to figure out how this anomaly came about. As their investigation progresses, each person spends time with the robot and asks it questions. This leads to Bogert asking the robot about Dr. Lanning's future plans and whether or not he, Bogert, would become head of the research department. At the same time, Dr. Calvin asks the robot about Ashe and whether or not he could be in love with Dr. Calvin.

One day, Dr. Calvin learns that everything the robot told her about Ashe was wrong when Ashe tells her he is getting married to a younger woman. Dr. Calvin confronts the robot at the same time Bogert comes to confront the robot about the fact that it told him Dr. Lanning was retiring within a week and leaving him in charge. When Dr. Calvin is able to recover from the pain of her emotional heartbreak, she explains to everyone that the robot lied to each of them because it could not break the first law that forbids a robot to cause a human harm, which to this robot means emotional harm as well as physical.

Analysis

This chapter again examines the first law of robotics. This robot, a mind reader, tells lies to the people around it in order to protect them from emotional harm. However, by doing this, the robot has caused more harm by giving hope. It is a complicated situation that the robot did not have the experience to navigate as a human might have, illustrating a clear difference between humans and robots.

Discussion Question 1

How does the robot read minds? Why is he being studied at US Robots? What will they do when they figure out how this works?

Discussion Question 2

What questions does Dr. Calvin ask the robot? Why does she believe the answers so readily? Could they be true? Why would the reader also assume the answers to be true?



Discussion Question 3

Why did the robot lie to Dr. Calvin and Dr. Bogert? Can a robot lie? How does this relate to the three laws of robotics?

Vocabulary

Guarantee, patronizing, assembly, recommend, manufacture, positronic, seriously, concentrate, ordinary, vintage, advance, phenomenon, effective, announce, gravely, mathematics, departments, insoluble, propaganda.

Chapter 6, Little Lost Robot

Summary

Susan Calvin continues her stories with the reporter by telling him of her first trip off the surface of the Earth. Dr. Calvin was called to a Hyperatomic Drive station to help find a missing robot. Dr. Calvin was told that the robot was one of a few special robots whose first law had been modified to allow the robots to leave workers alone while they were working with radiation. This project is highly sensitive and kept secret from everyone except those closely involved. For that reason, when the robot disappeared it was of great importance that he be found. The director of the Hyper Base knew that the robot was on board a transport ship with newly arrived robots of its kind. However, the missing robot could not be identified from the other robots on board. Dr. Calvin suggested several times that all the robots be destroyed, but this was not a financially feasible suggestion.

Dr. Calvin interviewed the human working with the robot and learned that he became angry with the robot and told it to get lost. With this information, Dr. Calvin began to interview the robots in an attempt to figure out which it was. However, the robot in question was an accomplished liar, and Dr. Calvin could not tell. Then it was decided to run a series of tests. Dr. Calvin decided to place a human in danger in a situation where the normal robots would have no choice but to react, but the modified robot would have a choice. However, the modified robot convinced the other robots not to respond to the situation by convincing them that it would be better to let one human die than to place themselves in danger and cause the deaths of many unknown humans in the future. Then Dr. Calvin realizes that the modified robot would have information about radiation that the other robots would not. With this knowledge, Dr. Calvin places herself in danger and convinces the robots they would die if they saved her because of a radiation field. However, the modified robot would know the radiation field was not harmful to him and would assume the others would know this as well. In this way, Dr. Calvin was able to identify the modified robot. Once identified, the robot tried to attack her, causing the workers to have to kill it. These robots were all later destroyed.

Analysis

This chapter poses the question of what would happen if the first law of robotics were altered. Dr. Calvin was called to a Hyper Base to find one such robot. This robot was highly intelligent, clearly believing itself to be superior to humans. For this reason, this robot delighted in tricking the humans and forcing them to struggle to identify it. This is similar to the robot in Chapter 3 that came to believe a Beam Director was its creator because humans were too inferior to create such a robot. Dr. Calvin, however, is able to use this sense of superiority to outsmart the robot and identify it. When she makes the identification, Dr. Calvin is nearly killed by the robot. This shows the reader how



dangerous a robot might be if the first law of robotics were to be altered, even just a small amount.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Dr. Calvin called to a Hyper Base? What is a Hyper Base? What is its purpose?

Discussion Question 2

Why would it be beneficial to alter the first law of robotics in some robots? Why was this done in this chapter? What was the result?

Discussion Question 3

How does Dr. Calvin set about trying to find the modified robot in this chapter? Why do her methods succeed at first? How does Dr. Calvin finally find the modified robot?

Vocabulary

Reasonable, precautions, fatal, ordinary, obedience, preservation, succeed, moderate, physiological, exceedingly, radiations, expensive, resentful, lassitude, approaching, investigation, intention, transporting, physicist, construction.



Chapter 7, Escape!

Summary

Dr. Calvin tells the reporter how when she returned to Earth after identifying the modified robot she learned that US Robots' chief competitor, Consolidated, might be close to beating them to completing the first Hyperatomic Drive. At a meeting with the head of US Robots, Dr. Calvin learned that Consolidated had a supercomputer like their own, the Brain, that was destroyed when they fed it a problem that could not be solved. Now Consolidated had come to them and asked to use their Brain to solve the same problem. The head of US Robots seemed to think that Consolidated blew up their supercomputer and now hoped to blow up US Robots' Brain to keep things even. However, Dr. Calvin insisted that their Brain was superior to Consolidated's and could handle the problem. For this reason, they decided to go ahead and feed the problem to Brain.

Before feeding Consolidated's problem to Brain, Dr. Calvin told Brain that it was okay to ignore some parts of the first law of robotics, if necessary. The problem turned out to be a ship that could make interstellar jumps. Donovan and Powell were sent on board to check it out. While they were on board, it closed up and took off. Dr. Calvin went to Brain to ask if the men were in danger, but the computer would not respond. Later, they would learn that Powell and Donovan did essentially die during the jump but were brought back afterward. This was the problem that destroyed Consolidated's supercomputer, but which Dr. Calvin's instructions allowed Brain to ignore.

Analysis

This chapter again touches on the first law of robotics. US Robots have developed a robot that is essentially a large supercomputer that can handle complex problems. This robot is fed a problem that the scientists at US Robots cannot identify, but they know that it destroyed a previous supercomputer belonging to a competitor. Dr. Calvin assumes the problem caused harm in some way to humans, and this is why the other computer could not handle it. So, she adjusts the first law of robotics in Brain before feeding it the problem. This allows the computer to create the ship that the problem creates. However, doing this allows two men to die momentarily while traveling in an interstellar jump. This chapter seems to illustrate the opposite of the previous chapter, that sometimes altering the first law of robotics can be beneficial.

Discussion Question 1

What is Brain? How is Brain different from the other robots? What is the purpose of this robot?



Discussion Question 2

Why does US Robots feed a problem to Brain that they do not fully understand? What is the expected outcome?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Powell and Donovan go on board the ship? What happens when they do? What is their biggest concern? What happens when the ship makes the interstellar jump?

Vocabulary

Innermost, sullen, interstellar, definitely, disturbance, optimistic, entirely, indications, abnormality, brusquely, instantaneous, finite, haggard, infinitely, indifferent, marooned, familiar, wretchedly, vibration, humiliating, impression.



Chapter 8, Evidence

Summary

To illustrate the changing impact of robots on the people of Earth through her lifetime, Dr. Calvin tells the reporter the story of Stephen Byerley. Byerley was accused by his political opponent for the Mayoralty of being a robot. This was based on the fact that Byerley had never been seen eating, drinking, or sleeping. The opponent, Quinn, went to Dr. Alfred Lanning to prove Byerley was a robot. However, during a meeting, Byerley ate an apple, convincing Lanning he was not a robot. Dr. Calvin, who was also present at the meeting, admitted to doubts because she said that anyone trying to make a robot that could pass as a human would make it capable of eating small amounts.

Quinn later sent officials to Byerley's house to search his home and his body to prove him a robot. However, as a prosecutor, Byerley knew the law and declared the warrant illegal. However, the official took a covert x-ray of Byerley, but Byerley was wearing a suit that blocked the x-ray. Quinn confronted Byerley about this x-ray, but Byerley insisted he had worn a special suit to block the x-ray not because he had something to hide, but to stand up for personal rights. Then, the day before the election, Byerley was giving a speech when someone in the crowd confronted him, insisting that he punch him to prove Byerley was not a robot. Byerley initially refused, but later he was provoked enough to hit the man. This seemed to prove Byerley was human, and he was elected to the Mayoralty. However, Dr. Calvin suggested that the man Byerley hit was actually a robot, too.

Analysis

This chapter illustrates how robots were distrusted on Earth, but they advanced so far that one could pass as human. Dr. Calvin tells the story of Byerley, a man who was a benevolent politician during a time when robots were still not well trusted by humans. Byerley was accused of being a robot and Dr. Calvin came to know him as US Robots was brought in to prove this accusation. Byerley appears to have proved himself human, but Dr. Calvin can see ways that he could have gotten around this. It is clear to the reader that Dr. Calvin believes Byerley to be a robot. If this is so, then the robot technology has come a very long way because Byerley seems very convincing as a human.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Stephen Byerley? Why does Quinn believe him to be a robot? What if it were to be proved that he is a robot?



Discussion Question 2

How does Quinn go about trying to prove Byerley is a robot? How can it be proved? What is the result of Quinn's attempts to prove Byerley is a robot?

Discussion Question 3

How does Byerley appear to prove he is human? Why does Dr. Calvin not believe he was really human? What is her proof?

Vocabulary

Strangeness, prehistoric, hastily, canvassed, chronic, impatience, acuity, professionally, unmistakable, acidity, connection, humorlessly, unremarkable, surprisingly, repetition, syllables, significance, incredible, mechanically, alcoholic, conception, investigate, impossibility.



Chapter 9, The Evitable Conflict

Summary

Stephen Byerley rose to become World Coordinator, leader of the five districts the world had divided itself into. One day Byerley called Dr. Calvin to his office to ask her about a problem he had begun to worry about. Each of the five districts have their own supercomputer, like Brain, that advises and helps run the district. In each of the five districts, something has gone wrong, causing it to appear that the computer made a mistake. Byerley had investigated and come to the conclusion that the people involved, all of them members of an organization of anti-robotics, fed the machines faulty information to make them appear to be making mistakes. Based on this, Byerley wanted to outlaw such organizations. Dr. Calvin, however, thinks that the machines made these choices on purpose in order to move these people out of positions of power to prevent a possible conflict in the future. In this way, the machines were keeping to the first law of robotics.

Analysis

In this chapter, Dr. Calvin reflects on how far the field of robotics has come in her lifetime. On Earth, the robots have been feared by many people even as they have slowly become a common part of everyday life. This has led to the development of groups who are against robots and protest the supercomputers that help run each of the five major governments in the world.

Byerley is now the leader of all five districts, and he has learned of difficulties with the machines that help run the governments of each district. He worries that these anti-robot groups have found a way to influence the machines, but Dr. Calvin sees a much more simple explanation. The machines are robots. As such, they must adhere to the three laws of robotics. Aware of the anti-robotic groups, the robots know that such groups could one day create a situation that could cause war among the humans. For this reason, the machines have appeared to malfunction in such a way that major members of these groups have been removed from positions of power that could aid them in causing such a conflict. In this way, the robots have once again adhered to the first law of robotics, preventing the harm of humans.

Discussion Question 1

What is World Coordinator? What power does this person have? Why has he turned to Dr. Calvin for help? What does that say about Dr. Calvin's expertise?



Discussion Question 2

What are the Machines? What is their role in this future world? What has caused the World Coordinator to become concerned about the Machines?

Discussion Question 3

What reason does Dr. Calvin give for the mistakes the Machines have been making? Is this plausible? How does it relate to the three laws of robotics?

Vocabulary

Controlled, ignition, entrance, domesticated, medieval, functional, significance, quartz, miniature, corporation, humanity, alternative, production, hydroponics, economist, consequences, mentioned, provided, intend, unbalances, perfection.



Characters

Dr. Susan Calvin

Dr. Susan Calvin is a robopsychologist who works at US Robots and Mechanical Men. It is Dr. Calvin's job to make the robots seem more like humans. Dr. Calvin has worked for US Robots most of her adult life and is now at retirement age. Dr. Calvin is speaking with a reporter to whom she tells stories about the development of robots through the years.

Dr. Calvin is a very serious person who has a tight focus on her job. Dr. Calvin never really mentions her private life except in one story in which she admits to having feelings for a younger colleague whom she hoped had feelings for her as well. She later learned that rumors of his feelings for her were lies told her by a robot who was attempting to not break the first law of robotics by hurting her feelings.

Michael Donovan

Michael Donovan is a scientist with US Robots who specializes, with partner Gregory Powell, in figuring out problems with robots after they are developed and are placed into service. Donovan is one of the scientists present who works with the robot who has such a conflict between the second and third laws of robotics that it becomes almost drunk with indecision. Another time, Donovan is present when a robot becomes so self-aware that it will not believe that Donovan put it together just a week prior to its self-discovery. Donovan also becomes one of the first men to experience interstellar travel.

Gregory Powell

Gregory Powell is Michael Donovan's partner. Together the two men have figured out many problems with robots, including the problem of the robot who came to be regarded as a prophet among its fellow robots and a set of primary and subsidiary robots that malfunctioned whenever danger occurred. Powell was the one who often figured out the problem and came up with a suitable solution. Powell also became one of the first persons to experience interstellar travel, though it was an experience he did not much enjoy.

Dr. Alfred Lanning

Dr. Alfred Lanning was the head of research at US Robots during Dr. Calvin's time. Dr. Lanning is an elderly man in the stories that Dr. Calvin tells that include him. In fact, in one story a coworker is anxious for Dr. Lanning to retire so that he can take over his position. Dr. Lanning is a pioneer in the work of robotics, however, and greatly respected by the majority of his coworkers.



Stephen Byerley

Stephen Byerley is a politician who was once accused of being a robot. Byerley is reported to have been in a devastating car accident as a young man and to have created a robot to take his place so that he might continue with the work he once dreamed of doing. Byerley seems to prove himself human by hitting a man after giving a speech, but Dr. Calvin theorizes that if Byerley's creator could make him, he could have made another robot so that Byerley could appear to have cleared any doubts of his humanity without breaking the laws of robotics. Later, Byerley is elected the World Coordinator, the ruler of all the world. When Byerley dies, he has his body destroyed to take away any chance of someone investigating and learning the truth of his nature.

Robbie

Robbie is one of the earliest robots. Robbie is a humanoid robot, but he does not have the ability to speak. Robbie is sold as a nursemaid to a young child. However, when Robbie exists there is a growing distrust of robots in the world. His child's mother becomes jealous of his connection to her daughter, so she uses the distrust of the neighbors to encourage her husband to get rid of Robbie. Robbie, who has been instilled with the same three laws of robotics as all other robots before and after him, saves the little girl's life and wins his way back into the family.

Gloria

Gloria is the little girl Robbie has been purchased to care for. Gloria does not see Robbie as a pet or a robot, but as a companion she enjoys spending time with. When Robbie leaves the family, Gloria is devastated, and all attempts by her parents to cheer her fail. Finally, Gloria's father decides to get Robbie back. He sets up a visit to US Robots in order to reunite the child with Robbie and convince his wife to allow Robbie to come back home. The father does not anticipate, however, that Gloria will run in front of an unmanned tractor and be saved by Robbie. Gloria would have to give Robbie up again seven years later when robots are banned on Earth, but Dr. Calvin suggests it would be easier for her to give him up at sixteen than nine.

Cutie

Cutie, or QT-1, is a new robot on a space station where Powell and Donovan are assigned to train to work the Beam Director. Cutie becomes self-aware and is convinced that humans are not superior enough to be its creator. For this reason, Cutie comes to believe that its creator is actually the Beam Director itself. Cutie becomes a prophet to the other robots and locks the humans away in a room to protect them from their own inferiority. In the end, Powell comes to the conclusion that Cutie's obsession with the Beam Director will make it effective in its intended job and will not harm it or humans in any way.

Dave

Dave, or DV-5, is the primary robot in a group of seven robots designed to work together in a mine on an asteroid. Dave is a new type of robot, and he begins to have trouble. Whenever something dangerous takes place in the mines, Dave would malfunction and lead his subordinates to do something odd like marching in formations. Powell came to the conclusion that this took place because handling six subordinates was too overwhelming for Dave during a crisis. By eliminating one subordinate, Powell was able to fix the problem.

Reporter

The entire book is structured around conversations between Dr. Calvin and an unnamed reporter. The reporter is writing stories about robots and wants Dr. Calvin's stories about the different types of robots so that he can write articles based on the evolution of robots over the years. It is for this reason that the stories in this novel are presented.



Symbols and Symbolism

Panet-radiation Photography

Quinn tries to use a Panet-radiation photograph to prove that Stephen Byerley is a robot, but Byerley is wearing a suit that causes the photograph to be overexposed.

Tractor

US Robots uses unmanned tractors to move supplies in their manufacturing plant. Gloria is nearly run over when she jumps in front of one of these tractors in her excitement to see Robbie again. Robbie saves her life and wins the right to return to the family.

Insosuit

Insosuits are suits Powell and Donovan wear on Mercury that are designed to protect them from the extreme heat on the surface of Mercury.

Visiplate

Visiplates are machines that work like video screens. Powell and Donovan use a visiplate to watch Dave on the asteroid while trying to figure out why he kept malfunctioning.

Beam Director

On Solar Station 5, there is a Beam Director that is designed to keep a beam on Earth at all times. It is this machine that Cutie comes to believe is his creator and Master.

Radiation

While developing a hyperatomic power station, humans are working with radiation. However, robots know that radiation is dangerous to humans, so they try to save the them. Ironically, the radiation is not harmful to humans under the right conditions, but it will destroy the robots. For this reason, several robots are developed without the entire first law of robotics, causing one of these robots to attempt to kill Dr. Calvin.



Machines

The Machines are robots that are essentially supercomputers that can work out complex problems. Machines are eventually used to aid governments and help them run their districts more efficiently.

Mercury Robots

When Powell and Donovan find themselves in a mining station on Mercury with a robot that has become unstable, they use two of six robots left behind by a previous expedition to help them retrieve the robot.

Interstellar Ship

Brain creates a ship that can create interstellar travel after being given a problem that destroyed a similar robot belonging to the competition.

US Robots and Mechanical Men

US Robots and Mechanical Men is a robotics company that is started in the 1980s. It becomes a leading manufacturer of robots throughout the time period discussed in the novel. US Robots is also Dr. Calvin's employer and the manufacturer of all the robots discussed in the novel.



Settings

Earth

The main setting of the novel is Earth because this is where US Robots is based and where many of the events in the novel take place. The novel covers many years, beginning in the nineties and ending in the mid 2050s. This time period includes many advances in robotics, including the development of the first humanoid robots and ending with the robots that are like supercomputers that help run whole governments. One of the most important elements of this setting is the fact that people on Earth are weary of the use of robots. Protest groups against robots continue to exist on Earth, even after a ban against robots is lifted, as robots begin to help aid governments.

Mercury

Powell and Donovan find themselves on Mercury where they are to prepare an abandoned mine for use. While there, they are forced to face the extreme heat of the surface to rescue a robot that appears to have malfunctioned.

Asteroid

One chapter takes place on an asteroid where Powell and Donovan struggle to figure out why a primary robot malfunctions each time he and his six subordinates are in danger.

Solar Station 5

Powell and Donovan are assigned to prepare a new robot to run a Beam Director on Solar Station 5. This robot becomes self-aware and is convinced the Beam Director is its true creator.

Hyper Station

Dr. Calvin travels off of Earth for the first time to visit a Hyper Station where a robot that has a modified first law has disappeared.



Themes and Motifs

Robots

This novel is a sci-fi novel that focuses on robotics. Robotics is the development of humanoid style machines that can complete complex tasks. The author imagines robots of all kinds, including those that are gentle enough to care for children, those that can work in dangerous mines, and those that can pass as human and govern as a part of a world-wide government.

The novel, published in 1950, imagines a futuristic world in which robots will become an important part of society. However, Asimov also imagines that humans will not trust these robots, and this will lead to conflict between humans and robots. Asimov's images have never truly come to pass, but they are still developing.

Robots, in Asimov's mind, are benevolent creatures that can be of use to humans if certain criteria is strictly followed. There is potential for trouble, and Asimov illustrates this trouble several times in his novel. Asimov discusses robots in great detail in this novel, making robotics a theme of the novel.

Laws of Robotics

The three laws of robotics play a major role in the plot of this novel. The three laws of robotics determine how a robot can behave. The first law states that a robot cannot harm or cause harm through inaction to a human. The second law states that a robot must obey a human, except where it conflicts with the first law. The third law states that a robot cannot place itself in harm, except where this law might conflict with the first two laws.

These laws are very important in governing the way a robot will behave. The first law seems to be the most important law, and it is the one illustrated most often in the novel. However, the other two laws have a great deal of weight when it comes to the behavior of a robot. This is illustrated best in the second chapter when Speedy becomes somewhat drunk when it finds itself conflicted between the second and third laws.

The laws of robotics give the robots guidelines by which they may function. When someone changes one of these laws, the behavior of the robot is altered to such a degree that at one point Dr. Calvin is almost injured by a robot. These are simple rules that could easily be applied to humans as well as robots, and they play such an important role in the novel that they are a major theme of the novel.



Superiority

In several of the stories of robots told by Dr. Calvin, robots feel as though they are superior to humans. One of these stories, the story of Cutie, takes a robot that has become self-aware and believes itself to be so superior to humans that there is no way a human could have made it. Instead, this robot believes a simple machine has to be its creator rather than these frail humans made of flesh and bone.

In another story, Dr. Calvin is sent to find a robot that has a modified first law that has disappeared among other robots of its make. This robot also has a sense that it is so superior to humans that it can outwit the humans and hide among the robots permanently. Dr. Calvin proves this not to be the case, and the robot becomes violent.

A sense of superiority is a character flaw that is found not only in robots, but among humans as well. Conceit and a lack of empathy make the robots dangerous. It is important that the sense of superiority and its harmful effects are pointed out in the story.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is written in two separate points of view. The novel is structured in such a way that it appears to be conversations between Dr. Susan Calvin and a reporter. In these sections, the novel is written in the first person point of view as the reporter relates to the reader what Dr. Calvin has said to him. The stories that Dr. Calvin tells, however, are written in the third person point of view.

The point of view of this novel is interesting because of the way in which the novel is structured. The first person point of view brings the reader to the present where a reporter is discussing with Dr. Calvin her experiences working with robots her entire adult life. In these discussions, Dr. Calvin tells the reporter stories about robots she has heard or experienced in her working life. These stories are often told second or third hand and therefore are not in the first person point of view. The first person viewpoint brings the reader tightly into the experience of the reporter as well as alerting the reader to the changes in the time line of the novel. The third person tells stories that at times can be funny and at others very personal. These points of view work well with the plot and the characters in the novel.

Language and Meaning

The author uses simple English in this novel. It is written for an adult audience, therefore the language is a little more precise than a language intended for a younger audience. However, the author has not chosen to make up a great many words that are unfamiliar to the reader or to use slang that might not be recognizable to all the intended audience. It is uncomplicated enough for the youngest readers, but it does not speak down to the reader. The language compliments the educated characters of the novel, as well as the robots who also speak within the plot. The language is authentic to the plot, the characters, and the intended audience, making it a good fit for this novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into nine chapters. Each chapter tells a story about robotics and how the science has developed over the years, beginning in the nineties and ending in the mid-2050s. The story is told in both narration and dialogue. The novel is structured to appear as though it is a conversation between Dr. Susan Calvin and a reporter who intends to do stories about robotics and is therefore collecting stories about robots through the years.

The novel contains many main plots and subplots. Each story has its own plot that is a part of the whole, a discussion of the three laws of robotics and how it has impacted the development of robots through the years. Several stories focus on the first law of

robotics, the inability of a robot to cause or cause by inaction, the death of a human. Others focus on the second and third laws of robotics while still others focus on a variation of all three. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

For fifty years, she watched the direction of human progress change—and leap ahead.
-- Reporter (Introduction paragraph 9)

Importance: This is the reporter's description of Dr. Calvin and his motivation for interviewing her.

Robbie's metal skin, kept at a constant temperature of seventy by the high resistance coils within, felt nice and comfortable while the beautifully loud sound her heels made as they bumped rhythmically against his chest was enchanting.
-- Dr. Calvin (Chapter 1 paragraph 27)

Importance: This describes Gloria's feelings for Robbie as he carries her around her front yard. It illustrates the warm relationship between them.

It was one of Gregory Powell's favorite platitudes that nothing was to be gained from excitement, so when Mike Donovan came leaping down the stairs toward him, red hair matted with perspiration, Powell frowned.
-- Dr. Calvin (Chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote illustrates the differences between the personalities of partners Powell and Donovan.

Say, Greg, he...he's drunk or something.
-- Donovan (Chapter 2 paragraph 121)

Importance: This is Michael Donovan's reaction to a robot that is acting oddly. It turns out the robot is not drunk, but conflicted by the first two laws of robotics.

Cutie gazed upon his long, supple fingers in an oddly human attitude of mystification, 'It strikes me that there should be a more satisfactory explanation than that. For you to make me seems improbable.
-- Cutie (Chapter 3 paragraph 9)

Importance: This is Cutie's response to being told he is man made. Cutie believes his maker is a machine on Space Station 5.

The unwritten motto of United States Robot and Mechanical Men Corp. was well-known: 'No employee makes the same mistake twice. He is fired the first time.
-- Gregory Powell (Chapter 4 paragraph 4)

Importance: This quote illustrates how important it is for Powell and Donovan to solve problems with the robots on their own before informing their superiors. That is why they tackle the problem with Dave on their own.



We've got a mind-reading robot on our hands and it strikes me as rather important that we find out just why it reads minds.

-- Dr. Calvin (Chapter 5 paragraph 8)

Importance: This is Dr. Calvin's argument for working with the mind reading robot in Chapter 5 that turns out to be telling everyone what they want to know instead of the truth.

My first connection (directly, that is) with interstellar research was in 2029, when a robot was lost—

-- Dr. Calvin (Chapter 6 paragraph 11)

Importance: This is how Dr. Calvin introduces the story of the lost robot on Hyper Station in Chapter 6.

However, the Brain, our own machine, has a personality—a child's personality. It is a supremely deductive brain, but it resembles an idiot savante. It doesn't really understand what it does—it just does it. And because it is really a child, it is more resilient. Life isn't so serious, you might say.

-- Dr. Calvin (Chapter 7 paragraph 31)

Importance: This is Dr. Calvin's description of Brain in Chapter 7. This computer is used to analyze plans for an unknown device from another company that turns out to be an interstellar spaceship.

He died last year.' Her voice was suddenly deeply sorrowful. 'Or at least he arranged to die, because he knew we needed him no longer—Stephen Byerley.

-- Dr. Calvin (Chapter 8 paragraph 5)

Importance: This is Dr. Calvin's introduction into the story of Stephen Byerley, a man who was believed to be a humanoid robot by many of his enemies. In the end, the reader is left with the impression that even Dr. Calvin believed him to be a robot, but greatly admired him just the same.

Then you believe him when he says I never eat. You are a scientist, Dr. Lanning. Think of the logic required. I have not been observed to eat, therefore, I never eat Q.E.D. After all!

-- Stephen Byerley (Chapter 8 paragraph 76)

Importance: This is Stephen Byerley's reaction to the evidence against him by his enemies who want to prove he is a robot.

But the fire itself was real. It was wired for sound, so that you could hear the crackle and, of course, you could watch it leap in the air stream that fed it.

-- Dr. Calvin (Chapter 9 paragraph 3)

Importance: Dr. Calvin describes a fire in Stephen Byerley's office in Chapter 9. This

description shows Dr. Calvin's nostalgia for the past and how far in the future this setting seems to be.