



“Forbidden Planet” (1956): Origins in Pulp Science Fiction

By Dr. John L. Flynn

While most critics tend to regard “Forbidden Planet” (1956) as a futuristic retelling of William Shakespeare’s “The Tempest”—with Morbius as Prospero, Robby the Robot as Ariel, and the Id monster as the evil Caliban—this very conventional approach overlooks the most obvious. “Forbidden Planet” was, in fact, *pulp science fiction*, a conglomeration of every cliché and melodramatic element from the pulp magazines of the 1930s and 1940s. With its mysterious setting on an alien world, its stalwart captain and blaster-toting crew, its mad scientist and his naïve yet beautiful daughter, its indispensable robot, and its invisible monster, the movie relied on a proven formula. But even though director Fred Wilcox and scenarist Cyril Hume created it on a production line to compete with the other films of its day, “Forbidden Planet” managed to

transcend its pulp origins to become something truly memorable. Today, it is regarded as one of the best films of the Fifties, and is a wonderful counterpoint to Robert Wise's "The Day the Earth Stood Still"(1951).

The Golden Age of Science Fiction is generally recognized as a twenty-year period between 1926 and 1946 when a handful of writers, including Clifford Simak, Jack Williamson, Isaac Asimov, John W. Campbell, Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Frederick Pohl, and L. Ron Hubbard, were publishing highly original, science fiction stories in pulp magazines. While the form of the first pulp magazine actually dates back to 1896, when Frank A. Munsey created The Argosy, it wasn't until 1926 when Hugo Gernsback published the first issue of Amazing Stories that science fiction had its very own forum. Other pulp science fiction magazines, including Astounding Science Fiction, Startling Stories, Weird Tales, Unknown, and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, were soon to follow. Pulp magazines flourished because they could be manufactured cheaply from chemically treated wood pulp, and sold at low costs to audiences that hungered for fun and adventure. Pulp stories emphasized action, romance, heroism, exotic worlds, fantastic adventures, and almost invariably upbeat, optimistic endings. Today, those stories are remembered with great fondness and nostalgia by science fiction fans because of their simple, straightforward approach.

Like the classic, pulp stories of the 1930s and 40s, "Forbidden Planet" relies on familiar story elements to tell an interesting and compelling story. Popular conventions like faster than light travel, mad scientists, robots and monsters, lost civilizations, and space opera formed the basis of the story. After traveling for more than a year in hyperspace, the United Planets Cruiser C57-D arrives at the forbidden world of Altair IV.

Commander J.J. Adams (Leslie Nielsen) and crew have been dispatched by Earth base to investigate the fate of a colony planted there years before. They find only one survivor, a reclusive philologist named Morbius (Walter Pidgeon), and his innocent daughter Altaira (Anne Francis). (Apparently, when the recall notice came, Morbius decided to remain behind with his wife, who has since passed away. The other members of his party were vaporized when their ship the *Bellophon* blasted off.) They also discover an amazing robot named Robby, which the philologist claims he “tinkered together.” Morbius insists that Adams and his crew leave immediately, refusing to take any responsibility for their lives. The starship commander declines, and orders his men to make camp. Later that night, some invisible force murders several of his men. The ship's doctor (Warren Stevens) suspects Morbius sent his robot on a rampage to frighten them away, but when the cook (Earl Holliman) comes forward to clear Robby, the mystery deepens. Eventually, they discover the remains of a buried civilization, abandoned millions of years before by its builders, the Krel, but still maintained by automation. Morbius has somehow tapped into their secret power supply, and his bestial side (known in Freudian terms as the Id), jealous of the commander's affection for his daughter Altaira, has produced an unstoppable monster. The mad doctor dies fighting his own creation, thus leaving the others free to take off in their ship. “Forbidden Planet” was a compilation of all of the major pulp science fiction themes.

The lost civilization of the Krel contains many wonders, including a form of nuclear power, and evidence that they paid a visit to Earth many thousands of years before the rise of man. Like the aliens in Clifford Simak's “Creator” (1935) and Arthur C. Clarke's “The Sentinel” (1951), the Krel are so far removed from their human

counterparts that they appear almost godlike. But on the verge of their greatest accomplishment—the control of instrumentation by thought alone—they are struck down in a single night like the lofty-minded aliens in Clarke’s “The Star” (1955). The vast and mysterious civilization of the Krel falls back into the planet, and is buried for a half million years. Similar stories from science fiction and the pulp magazines told of vast and mysterious alien civilizations and the intrepid spacemen who find them, including H.G. Wells’s First Men in the Moon (1901) and A.E. van Vogt’s “Voyage of the Space Beagle” (1951). What sets “Forbidden Planet” apart from the rest is that Krel are never actually seen; like the elusive Martians in Ray Bradbury’s The Martian Chronicles (1950), the Krel are characterized by details that have been left behind in their cities, like their arches, their instrumentation, and their music.

Stalwart Commander J.J. Adams and his all-male blaster-toting crew are basically cardboard cutouts of every spaceman who went looking for adventure in the space operas of pulp science fiction. Space opera, a term coined by Wilson Tucker in 1941, referred to space adventure stories in which intrepid, space-faring heroes went “boldly” “where no man had gone before” and faced dangers on a thousand different alien worlds. As far back as 1900, with Robert William Cole’s The Struggle for Empire, space adventurers have been toting blasters, killing rampaging monsters, and making the galaxy safe for the rest of us in much the same way that cowboys with six-shooters cleaned up the wild west. The most popular stories, including E.E. “Doc” Smith’s “Skylark” and “Lensman” series and Edmund Hamilton’s “Captain Future” novels, were aimed at the juvenile market, and appealed mostly to adolescent males. Commander J.J. Adams (as portrayed by hammy Leslie Nielsen) is the model of the very modern major spaceman with his strong, forceful

demeanor and good looks; spun from the same cloth as Tom Corbett and Buzz Corey, he represented the square-jawed, one-dimensional starship captain. At his side, Doc Ostrow (Warren Stevens), the logical science officer, and Lt. Jerry Farman (Jack Kelly), the sentimental, cocksure first officer, complete a familiar triumvirate that had its roots in the juvenile space adventures of Robert Heinlein and would later form the basis of the three central characters in “Star Trek.” The basic idea of Adams and his all-male crew of space cowboys was an old one in science fiction terms by the time “Forbidden Planet” was made, and seems even now more outdated and quaint.

Even more outdated was the mad scientist Morbius and his naïve and innocent daughter Altaira. By 1956, the archetype of the mad scientist no longer carried the literary weight of moral and ethical indifference that it had once had, and was now considered a cliché or bad joke. Morbius is a direct descendant of Aylmer, the alchemist in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” (1840), Jack Griffin, the scientist with lofty ideals in Wells’s The Invisible Man (1897), and the quintessential mad scientist and symbol for scientific rationalism, Dr. Victor Frankenstein. No matter how objective and well intentioned the great doctor may be, he still tends to produce a monster. In the pulp magazines of 1930s and 1940s, the mad scientist became the literary equivalent of the mustached villain of cheap melodrama. In “Forbidden Planet,” Morbius wears a mustache, dresses all in black, and talks about his lofty goals for mankind, while the monstrous creature he has unleashed stalks and kills Commander Adams’s men. Just as the mad scientist Morbius is a throwback to another time, the virginal Altaira was the damsel in distress from another era. When she goes for a swim in the nude in front of Commander Adams or kisses Jerry Farman as part of a biological experiment, Altaira has

no clue how she affects the men; but when the Id monster strikes, she is the first to scream for rescue by her male playmates. The early pulp magazines featured more than their fair share of half-naked women who needed rescuing from the clutches of mad scientists, marauding aliens, and rampaging robots; in fact, the most successful issues were generally those with lurid illustrations of busty, menaced women by Earle Bergey and others because they appealed to the prurient interests of juvenile audiences. Even the exploitative poster from the film featured a scantily clad Altaira in the hands of what appears to be a rampaging robot.

Robby the Robot represents benevolence and goodwill, the dreams of science made whole, and is clearly a product of pulp science fiction. Prior to 1940, robots were envisioned as slave laborers, as in “Rossum’s Universal Robots” (1921) by Karel Capek, or rampaging monsters, from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) to Franz Harper’s Plus and Minus (1929). In the Forties, at the behest of editor John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov compiled a list of rules or commandments, which were supposed to be stamped on the positronic brains of every robot, and explored how those commandments affected the behavior of robots in “Robbie” (1940), “Liar” (1940), and other tales. Those rules or commandments later became known as the Three Laws of Robotics: 1.) A robot may not injure a human being, or through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. 2.) A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. 3.) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. Robby, who takes his name from the Asimov short story, complies with those laws, and demonstrates his compliance when he is ordered to kill Commander J.J. Adams and nearly short-circuits. Later in the

film, when he is ordered to defend Altaira from the Id monster, Robby short-circuits and completely shuts down because he cannot save her without endangering the life of Morbius. He faces the same kind of moral dilemmas that Asimov's robots face. Like Eando Binder's Adam Link, the robots in Clifford Simak's "City" (1952), and so many other metal men from the pulp era, Robby is a kindly and valued servant of man, and not at all a rampaging monster.

On the other hand, the invisible Id monster in "Forbidden Planet" is the synthesis of Morbius's petty jealousies and unspeakable desires all bound together into one unstoppable creature. The Id monster follows no commandments or laws, except the law of survival. Ever since Mary Shelley's Frankenstein created the first artificial man and rejected him because of his ugliness and fallen nature, man-made monsters have been a staple in science fiction. In the early pulps, monsters proved to be an easy foil for the stalwart hero, and were plentiful, if not entirely believable or fleshed-out. The first invisible monster appeared in George Allan England's "The Thing from—Outside" (1926), published in the very first issue of Amazing Stories. Many other monsters followed, from bug-eyed monsters (as in Charles Diffin's "Dark Moon," 1931) to shape-shifters (as in John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There?", 1938). What is unique about the monster in "Forbidden Planet" is that it derives from Freud's theories about the driving force of personality, the id. The id (from the German *das es*, meaning "the it") contained all of the animal instincts for survival, including hunger, thirst, and sexual desire, and left unchecked by the ego became the mindless primitive. The monster is a product of the mad scientist's darkest desires to play God, and eventually it destroys him, in a retelling of the Frankenstein story.

The faster-than-light speed of the United Space Cruiser C57-D is attributed, in a voice-over narrative at the beginning of the film, to the discovery of hyperdrive. With the vast distances between the various stars (and planets), many pulp science fiction stories relied on techno-babble to explain how spaceships reached velocities at or near the speed of light and still managed to arrive at their destinations in only a few weeks time. Concepts like jump gates, space-warp, and hyperdrive were used to clarify faster than light travel. E.E. “Doc” Smith engaged an “inertialess drive” in the Lensman novels, and Asimov relied on a stardrive in the Foundation books. The first author to invoke the concept of hyperspace—a kind of fourth dimension where ships could travel at high velocities of speed—was John W. Campbell in “The Mightiest Machine” (1934), while Robert Heinlein was simply content to use FTL travel to get his characters from one end of the galaxy to the other without a lot of needless explanation in his juveniles. The C57-D, which resembles a flying saucer, follows in this same tradition, taking it one step further by requiring the crew to stand in de-acceleration stations while the spaceship slows to standard speed.

“Forbidden Planet” was very well received in its day, and while it appears to be a conglomeration of clichés from the era of the pulp science fiction magazine, it continues to delight audiences nearly forty years later.

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