

"forbidden planet" and "the tempest"

Literature, William Shakespeare



On first glance, Forbidden Planet can easily be seen to parallel many other works relating to technology, nature, or both. One of the most obvious parallels is, of course, to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the story of a man stranded on an island which he has single-handedly brought under his control through the use of magic. Indeed, the characters, plot, and lesson of *Forbidden Planet* mirror almost exactly those of *The Tempest*, with the exception that where *The Tempest* employs magic, *Forbidden Planet* utilizes technology.

At this point, it is useful to recall one of Arthur C. Clarke's more famous ideas, which is that any technology, when sufficiently advanced, is indistinguishable from magic. Indeed, the technology presented in *Forbidden Planet* is not meant to be understood by the audience, but rather is, for all intents and purposes, magic. This is undoubtedly in part because the technology doesn't exist and therefore cannot be explained to us.

What is more important, however, is that how the technology works is irrelevant for the purpose of the movie, which is to entertain and to teach us a lesson about man's control over the elements and over his own technological creations.

At this point a brief synopsis of the movie would seem to be in order, with special attention as to how it relates to *The Tempest*. In *The Tempest*, a man named Prospero and his daughter Miranda have been exiled to a remote island which is completely uninhabited, save for an evil monster and her son Caliban, and which is in a state of primal chaos. Using the magical powers he has cultivated all his life, Prospero gradually brings the forces of nature on

the island under his control, and manages to somehow enslave Caliban, whose mother has died in the interim. (Some of these details are fuzzy because I am familiar with *The Tempest* only through Marx). A group of sailors is shipwrecked on the island, one of whom falls in love with Miranda, the lovely daughter of Prospero. Eventually, Caliban and other servants plot to overthrow Prospero, but are thwarted and taken back into servitude, thankful to get off that easily. Having summarized *The Tempest*, it is easy to summarize *Forbidden Planet*. A man named Dr. Morbius and his daughter Altaira are stranded on a distant planet when a government ship lands there, whose commander falls in love with the beautiful Altaira.

The only significant difference in the two works, other than setting, is the conclusion of each. Before we look at the differences there, however, it is necessary to look more closely at the symbolism behind each. In *The Tempest*, Prospero's magic is a symbol of technology. It lets him tame the island, is completely at his command, and even is understandable by those who take the time to study it. Caliban represents the forces of nature, which Prospero has enslaved using magic, a. k. a. technology. It is worth noting here that Shakespeare perceives "nature" in the form of a wild, hostile environment, not as a "garden of eden" form, a concept he pokes fun at in one of the opening scenes. Eventually, nature rises up and lashes out at Prospero, but (from what one can gather from Marx), his magic saves him. He then accepts Caliban back into servitude. The perfect harmony is thus achieved—man using technology to tame nature, and doing it so well that he achieves the best of both worlds. *Forbidden Planet* teaches a different lesson, and teaches it in two separate stories.

The first is the story of the Krell, a superintelligent race that rose to its peak and then fell 2000 centuries before Dr. Morbius and his daughter set foot on the planet. The Krell had achieved what they considered to be the pinnacle of technology—they had left behind their physical bodies in exchange for computers. Their consciousness resided in computers, which “projected” bodies for them, so to speak. The perfect blending of man (or creature, anyway) and technology. They were, in fact, a version of Hardison’s “silicon creature”—they had no physical bodies, save for a series of ones and zeros stored somewhere in the memory of a supercomputer 40 miles long. What the Krell had forgotten to explore, however, was their own psyche.

Confronted with the virtually limitless power they had due to the nature of what they had become, all they did was loot, riot, and otherwise engage in self-destructive activity, so that in one day the entire race was destroyed. In this case, technology in the form of the Krell’s supercomputer became a slave to the most basic form of nature—the subconscious, where primal emotions rage with all the fury of a physical tempest. As we see, the results when nature controls technology are disastrous. The second story is the story of Dr. Morbius. At the outset, Altaira IV could easily be mistaken for paradise, albeit an arid and lonely one. While the area that the ship is in is a desert like climate, the dwelling place of Morbius and Alta seems climactic enough. Deer frolick in the nearby forest, and tigers which are normally fearsome killers are petted like kitty cats. It is the tiger which is the first clue that things are going wrong. An obvious symbol of nature, a tiger attacks Alta one day while Commander Adams is there. Adams quickly uses his blaster on the tiger, symbolizing the utter dominance of technology over

nature on Altaira IV. Shortly afterwards, things start getting worse, and culminate in a fearsome attack by “ nature” in the form of Morbius’s subconscious on Adams’s ship. As the plot unfolds, we find out that Dr. Morbius, by meddling with technology he didn’t fully understand, managed to inadvertently kill dozens of people.

It is worth noting that Morbius realizes on some level the extent to which things have gotten out of hand when his daughter pleads with him to help the crew of the ship. His reply to her is along the lines of “ I cannot help him (Commander Adams) as long as he stays so willfully”. In short what Morbius is saying is strongly reminiscent of Frankenstein’s message, that is, “ This technology that I am supposedly ‘ master’ of has gotten out of my control, and I am powerless to stop it”. Dr. Morbius is a grim reminder again of what can happen when technology is allowed to increase unchecked, to the point where human beings can no longer understand it, let alone control it.

Ironically, Dr. Morbius himself warned against the unchecked growth of technology by refusing to allow mankind access to the Krell’s wondrous secrets. Instead, he insisted that he would dispense what pearls of wisdom he saw fit, the better to keep mankind from destroying itself. In the end, of course, the entire planet was destroyed, along with several neighboring star systems.

There are several lessons to be learned from Forbidden Planet. The first is that before man can hope to control nature or technology, he needs to learn to control himself, as evidenced by the disaster which destroyed the Krell. Second, when technology and nature are in direct conflict, the results will not

be beneficial, and will probably be destructive. Third, when technology and nature are too far off balance from each other, the results will again be detrimental. In short, Forbidden Planet is a kind of Frankenstein which is more developed and has better symbolism, which is to say that it counsels the same course of action that Florman does—caution, but not inaction. If we allow nature to run rampant, we clearly cannot survive. (This statement again takes the assumption that “ nature” is a tempest, not a garden of eden.) If we allow technology to go unchecked, it will eventually overwhelm us when we least expect it. And if we pit the two against each other, it will destroy our entire solar system. The proper course of action, then, is just what both Florman and Morbius propose—proceed slowly, and take into account the fact that all that is new is not necessarily good.