

Isaac Asimov, *The Machine That Won The War*

LITERARY BITS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ISAAC ASIMOV

Isaac Asimov was born in Russia in 1920, but his family emigrated to the United States when he was only three. He spent his childhood in New York reading science fiction magazines and began writing stories of the same kind when he was only eleven. By nineteen, he was selling them to science fiction magazines.

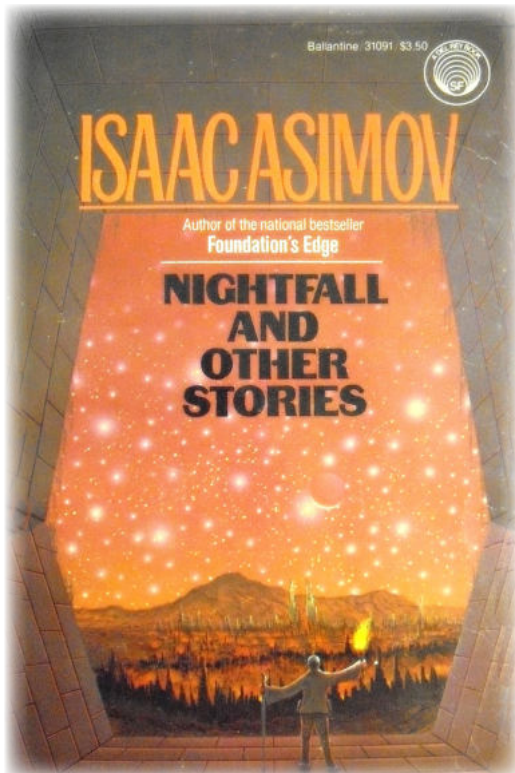
He obtained a doctorate in biochemistry at Columbia and worked as a professor of the same discipline at Boston University.

He was afraid of flying and this phobia influenced his writing. His early career was dominated by science fiction short stories and novels until 1958, then, after a period dedicated to other types of writing, he resumed his science fiction writing in 1982.

He was the creator of the three laws of robotics and died in New York in 1992.



I. Asimov



ABOUT THE NOVEL

THE MACHINE THAT WON THE WAR

The short story was written in 1961 and published in the collection "Nightfall and other stories" in 1969.

The story is apparently a celebration of the computer Multivac as the winner of the war against the Denebians, but things change with the explanation provided by Henderson, the Chief Programmer. Multivac spared many human lives, but at some point its data became unreliable and the programmer had to input new data using intuition. At the end of the story we discover that the programmer played **head or tail** with a coin to make the final decision.

head or tail: *testa o croce*

THE TEXT

Human brain versus computer processor

The three short extracts provide an insight of the role played by the programmer in winning the war with Multivac.

1. The celebration had a long way to go and even in the silent depths of Multivac's underground chambers, it hung in the air. If nothing else, there was the mere fact of isolation and silence. For the first time in a decade, technicians were not **scurrying about** the vitals of the giant computer, the soft lights did not **wink out** their erratic patterns, the flow of information in and out **had halted**.

It would not be halted long, of course, for the needs of peace would be pressing. Yet now, for a day, perhaps for a week, even Multivac might celebrate the great time, and rest. Lamar Swift took off the military cap he was wearing and looked down the long and empty main corridor of the enormous computer. He sat down rather wearily in one of the technician's swing-stools, and his uniform, in which he had never been comfortable, took on a heavy and wrinkled appearance.

He said, "I'll miss it all after a **grisly** fashion. It's hard to remember when we weren't at war with Deneb, and it seems against nature now to be at peace and to look at the stars without anxiety."

The two men with the Executive Director of the Solar Federation were both younger than Swift. Neither was as gray. Neither looked quite as tired.

John Henderson, thin-lipped and finding it hard to control the relief he felt in the midst of triumph, said, "They're destroyed! They're

destroyed! It's what I keep saying to myself over and over and I still can't believe it.

We all talked so much, over so many years, about the menace hanging over.

Earth and all its worlds, over every human being, and all the time it was true, every word of it. And now we're alive and it's the Denebians who are shattered and destroyed. They'll be no menace now, ever again."

"Thanks to Multivac," said Swift, with a quiet glance at the imperturbable Jablonsky, who through all the war had been Chief Interpreter of science's oracle. "Right, Max?" Jablonsky shrugged. Automatically, he reached for a cigarette and decided against it. He alone, of all the thousands who had lived in the tunnels within Multivac, had been allowed to smoke, but toward the end he had made definite efforts to avoid making use of the privilege.

He said, "Well, that's what they say." His broad thumb moved in the direction of his right shoulder, aiming upward.

"Jealous, Max?"

"Because they're shouting for Multivac? Because Multivac is the big hero of mankind in this war?" Jablonsky's **craggy** face took on an air of suitable contempt. "What's that to me? Let Multivac be the machine that won the war, if it pleases them."

2. Henderson said, "Multivac had nothing to do with victory. It's just a machine."

"A big one," said Swift.

"Then just a big machine. No better than the data fed it." For a moment, he stopped, suddenly unnerved at what he was saying. Jablonsky looked at him, his thick fingers once again fumbling for a cigarette and once again drawing back. "You should know. You supplied the data. Or is it just that you're taking the credit?"

craggy: *rugoso*
grisly: *orribile*
to halt: *fermare*

to scurry about: *cercare*
to wink out: *scintillare*

“No,” said Henderson, angrily. “There is no credit. What do you know of the data Multivac had to use; predigested from a hundred subsidiary computers here on Earth, on the Moon, on Mars, even on Titan. With Titan always delayed and always that feeling that its figures would introduce an unexpected **bias**.”

“It would drive anyone mad,” said Swift, with gentle sympathy. Henderson shook his head. “It wasn’t just that. I admit that eight years ago when I replaced Lepont as Chief Programmer, I was nervous.

But there was an exhilaration about things in those days. The war was still long-range; an adventure without real danger. We hadn’t reached the point where manned vessels had had to take over and where interstellar **warps** could swallow up a planet clean, if aimed correctly. But then, when the real difficulties began.”

Angrily – he could finally permit anger – he said, “You know nothing about it.” “Well,” said Swift. “Tell us. The war is over. We’ve won.” “Yes.” Henderson nodded his head. He had to remember that. Earth had won so all had been for the best. “Well, the data became meaningless.”

3. “What did you do?” said Jablonsky. “Since the war is won, I’ll tell you what I did. I corrected the data.”

“How?” asked Swift.

“Intuition, I presume. I **juggled** them till they looked right. At first, I hardly dared, I changed a bit here and there to correct what were obvious impossibilities. When the sky didn’t collapse about us, I got braver. Toward the end, I scarcely cared. I just wrote out the necessary data as it was needed. I even had the Multivac Annex prepare data for me according to a private programming pattern I had devised for the purpose.”

bias: *pregiudizio*

to juggle: *rimescolare come un giocoliere*

warp: *curvatura*

COMPREHENSION

1 Read the text and give a title to each of the three sections.

2 Read section 1 and decide if these statements are true or false.

1. The war lasted ten years.
2. Multivac stopped working after the war.
3. Swift was the youngest of the group.
4. Jablowsky was the interpreter of Multivac.
5. Jablowsky used to smoke in the tunnel.

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3 Read section 2 and answer the questions.

1. Where did the data processed by Multivac come from?
2. What was the problem with Titan?
3. What was the first stage of the war like?
4. What happened to data in the end?

4 Read section 3 and summarise what Henderson did with data.

ANALYSIS

5 Answer the questions.

1. Who is the narrator of the story?
2. Does the story progress through narration or dialogue?
3. What are Jablowsky and Henderson's jobs?
4. Find all the characters in the story and describe their feelings.

DISCUSSION

6 Discuss.

1. What type of IT technology is used for military purposes? What type of data do you think military computers are able to process?
2. How do you imagine Multivac? A big computer or a warrior robot like the ones in Japanese cartoons?
3. What types of input/output devices could be applied to a computer used for military purposes?
4. Do you believe in logic or intuition? Which is the strongest? The human brain or a computer processor?