

What is an Alien?
By Miriam Ruff
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There have been many articles, conversations, speculations about the aliens in “Star Trek”: What were they? What made them alien? Were they too different to be able to comprehend or too much like us to consider them alien? But even with all the discussions I have encountered, I found myself contemplating a new twist to the alien question after watching the episode “The Emissary” on “Star Trek: The Next Generation”.

Before I can elaborate on this, though, I need to define what is meant by alien. Webster’s New World Dictionary describes an alien as ‘belonging to another country or people’ or ‘an outsider.’ The aliens in “Star Trek” were certainly that; the Klingons, Balok, the Horta, the Guardian of Forever, and the Harada, to name just a few, all display characteristics – though different from each other – that make them alien to us, the viewer.

The Klingons were one of the early aliens introduced in the original series, but in some ways they were the most human. Physically they resembled humans very closely, so closely that when Arn Darvin of “The Trouble with Tribbles” shaved his eyebrows, he could pass for a human with no difficulty. They came from a very aggressive, warlike, and brutal society, and unlike the Federation they thrived on the interference in and domination of other worlds. But as Kirk said in “A Private Little War” and “Omega Glory,” the Federation and the Klingons were much like the major powers of twentieth century Earth. Though brutal, they resembled many of Earth’s warlike races. Though supposedly without honor or conscience (a concept which was redefined for ST:TNG), they successfully mirrored the more savage human characteristics of the conquerors and marauders that shaped much of this planet’s early and even modern history. This made them perhaps the least different from us of any of the aliens introduced in the original series.

Balok, the representative of the First Federation in “The Corbomite Maneuver,” was alien to us mostly in a physical sense. He was short, bald, his voice seemingly too deep and mature to fit the stature of the person it came from. His race possessed technology both different and more advanced than ours, giving him the upper hand in a strictly military confrontation. But he understood humans well; his use of the Mr. Hyde puppet and the faked distress call were both tactics that Kirk or one of the other crew members would have used if they were in his position, and in that sense he, like the Klingons, was no more than a human put in another setting.

The Horta were much more alien than Balok could ever be. Part of this, to be certain, was due to the communication barrier between the species. It was not until Spock mind-melded with the mother Horta that the motive behind the murder of the Janus VI miners – the perhaps universal idea of maternal love and protection among sentient species – could be understood. There was also a difference in chemical composition. This was the first time that anyone in the

Federation had encountered a creature made of silicon. Even McCoy declared that such a creature would be “physiologically impossible, especially in an oxygen atmosphere,” until it became obvious that such a creature did exist. This difference made it impossible for the two species to coexist, except by chance encounter as one of the Horta emerged from a newly constructed tunnel. Without the ability to live together and to communicate in more than a rudimentary sense except through telepathy, the Horta will of necessity remain true aliens, forever isolated from the Federation and other carbon-based civilizations.

The Guardian of Forever is another example of an alien that remains truly isolated from the Federation’s people. When asked in the episode “The City on the Edge of Forever” whether it was machine or being, the Guardian replied, “I am both, and neither. I am my own beginning, my own ending,” and when questioned on this said only, “I answer as simply as your level of understanding permits.” It was eons ahead of us in technology and experience, an entity that we could not begin to understand or define. The doughnut-shaped object of unknown materials did not look like anything that either the Enterprise crew or we could identify as a living being, but it was undeniably aware and sentient. It could not move or leave the planet, yet it was able to manipulate time and bring Kirk, Spock, and McCoy back to Earth in the 1930s. It was so different, so alien, we could only marvel at its existence and hope that someday we would be able to comprehend its mysteries.

The Harada of “The Big Goodbye” were almost completely alien to us as well. An insect-like race that we had never met face-to-face and whose language and social code were so structured that a word mispronounced by a human was enough to start a war that lasted decades, they were difficult to understand or deal with. But unlike the Guardian, they were not beyond our comprehension. Although both sides of the human/Harada conflict remained wary of each other, it was established at the end of the episode that there would be a new era of communication between them, though there was no indication that either side would give up any of its uniqueness. Perhaps a true expression of IDIC will be the result.

It is clear in each of these cases that the characters and the races presented contain qualities which make them different from us, either by choice or by physical reality. For us the perception of identity in these cases is always an either/or scenario – the character is either alien or human. And while some of those mentioned here may contain traits similar to humans, it is also clear that to all of them the choice is equally as delineated, and they consider themselves to be what we denote as the “alien.”

But then, how can we classify the hybrids, those beings who come from more than one background and who may display physical or behavioral characteristics from each? And unlike in all the other cases mentioned, does the classification of identity here come from without, either from the Federation or from us, the viewer, or can it come from within the character as well?

The most famous example of such a hybrid is undeniably Spock, the first officer of the Enterprise and friend to James T. Kirk. His father, Sarek, was from the planet Vulcan; his mother, Amanda, was a human from the planet Earth. Physically and behaviorally he appears to

be a Vulcan, and anyone who did not know him would assume this to be the case. There were indications, though, in many of the episodes, that Spock did have a human side. In “The Enemy Within,” he openly admits to Kirk and McCoy that “I have a human half as well as an alien half.” In “Operation – Annihilate,” when he is attacked by one of the flying parasites, he tells Kirk that Vulcans are able to shut out pain and he, therefore, is able to return to duty despite his current situation. When questioned on the effect of his human half, he is forced to admit to its existence and replies candidly that “It is proving to be an inconvenience.” “Journey to Babel” saw Sarek in need of a critical blood transfusion for a malfunctioning heart valve, but his blood type, T negative, was extremely rare. Spock volunteered to provide his blood since he was also T negative, but Nurse Chapel was forced to point out that “It’s not true Vulcan blood; it has human blood elements in it.”

Despite all this evidence of his duality, we learn that Spock considers himself to be not Vulcan/human, but Vulcan. Period. In the episode “Amok Time,” when he is describing the precedents in nature for the pon farr, Kirk says to him, “But you’re not a fish, Mr. Spock.” Spock responds unhesitatingly, “No, nor am I a man. I am a Vulcan.”

Later in the episode T’Pau confronts Spock with his dual heritage at the Kunat Kaliffee ceremony, and again asks him to define what he is. Deep in the plak tow, Spock still pleads with her for Kirk’s life, knowing that his friend and commander does not understand the nature of the challenge. T’Pau, seeing this as a sign of weakness says, “It has been said thy Vulcan blood is thin. Art thee Vulcan, or art thee human?” To which Spock once again replies unhesitatingly, “My blood burns, T’Pau. My eyes are flame. My heart is flame.” It is the response of a Vulcan.

And we see in “The Wrath of Khan,” when Spock tries to save the ship from certain destruction by going into the radiation chamber and getting the mains back on line, that he responds to McCoy’s protests of “No human can tolerate the radiation in there” by stating that “As you are so fond of observing, Doctor, I am not human.”

Spock’s classification as Vulcan, then, comes both from without and within. Outsiders relate to him as they would to any other Vulcan, and despite being aware of his dual heritage, Spock chooses to consider himself what is to us the “alien.”

Deanna Troi, ship’s counselor aboard “Star Trek: The Next Generation’s Enterprise, is half human and half Betazoid. Her mother, Lwaxana Troi, is a full Betazoid, and her father was human, from Earth. Physically Betazoids do not differ from humans, and so we cannot classify them as alien or human based on appearance.

We do know, however, that Betazoids are telepathic. Deanna, though, being only half Betazoid, does not share her mother’s formidable telepathic abilities, instead only being able to sense strong emotions. She makes no attempt to conceal her abilities, and indeed they play an important role in her function as ship’s counselor. The captain and other officers clearly think of her as Betazoid, relying on her “alien” abilities in difficult situations, constantly seeking her impressions of the emotional state of the other ships and individuals they encounter, as well as situations aboard their own ship. She reinforces their impressions by volunteering such

information and confronting each of them when she senses internal conflict or feelings they refuse to confront.

To other telepathic or empathic races, Troi is also clearly Betazoid. Having grown up in a society that admires honesty and forthrightness, and used to being around non-telepathic or empathic people while aboard the Enterprise, she makes little attempt to hide her emotional state, and she may even project it to non-telepathic individuals. In “Encounter at Farpoint,” when the landing party entered Groppler Zorn’s office, without apparent cause Zorn said to her, “You are a Betazoid?” The implications of someone being able to tell that he was lying to Starfleet and the Federation was enough to shake him badly. Devanani Ral in “The Price” could sense the moment he walked into the observation lounge that Troi was Betazoid, and used his own abilities to form a relationship with her. And she made no attempt to shield her thoughts from Tam Elbrun in “Tin Man,” simply accepting their telepathic and empathic conversations as normal and acceptable, despite the fact that the rest of the crew found their own conversations with Tam unsettling at the least.

Because of the less rigid structure of Betazoid life, Troi’s situation is much more complicated than Spock’s, and we see that despite the dominance of her Betazoid half, she is not entirely sure how to view herself. In “Manhunt” we learn of something called ‘The Phase,’ a period that all Betazoid women must go through during midlife which can quadruple or more their sex drive. While explaining this to the captain to help him fend off Lwaxana Troi’s advances, Riker mentions that Deanna warned him about this when the first started seeing each other. Unlike Spock who hoped his dual heritage might spare him of the ordeal of pon farr, Troi expects that although she is half human she will have to endure The Phase, a purely Betazoid phenomenon.

Back to “The Price,” we saw another affirmation of the dominance of her Betazoid half. In bed with Ral, she tries to discover more about him – when he asks her what her Betazoid senses tell her, she replies, “Not much. My human physical responses must be getting in the way . . . It’s never happened before.” She depends on her Betazoid half to tell her about people and situations all the time; having grown up with such powers, it is difficult for her to have to rely on the incomplete information available to mere humans to base a judgement.

Despite this acknowledgement, she makes it a point in “Encounter at Farpoint” to indicate to Groppler Zorn that she is half human. She tells K’heylah’r in “The Emissary” that she tried to experience the richness of both her heritages, and it is clear in “The Price” that she acknowledges that her human side does play a part in her life.

Troi’s classification, then, cannot be based on physical criteria since she does not appear sufficiently different from humans to distinguish between the two, but it can and is determined by outsiders who invariably classify her as Betazoid. And while Troi herself is sometimes unclear about which side she embraces, she most often favors her Betazoid half, making the classification of “alien” come from within as well.

Devanani Ral is also a hybrid. As he tell Troi, “I am also part Betazoid. My mother was one half. I am one quarter.” He, like Troi, is physically indistinguishable from a human, so we

cannot classify him by this means. Outsiders invariably view him as human; he was born on Earth, and he gives no indication to anyone that he has any unusual powers. In fact, Deanna was the first person that he told about his background, and that only after she promised not to reveal it to anybody else.

But it is clear that Ral thinks of himself as Betazoid, not human. At the age of 19 he left Earth because, as the only one of five children with empathic powers, he grew up in an environment where both he and others regarded him as “different,” even if the others did not know or understand why, and this made him uncomfortable. And in conversation he continually refers to himself, Deanna and other empaths as “we,” and everyone else as “them.” Physiologically less “alien” than any of the other hybrids we have seen, he classifies himself as Betazoid, and therefore as the alien.

This brings me to the interesting twist brought about by ST:TNG. All of the hybrids previously introduced, regardless of how others have classified them, thought of themselves as being the race we would consider alien. But now we are introduced to K’heylah’r, the half Klingon, half human special emissary in “The Emissary.” Upon viewing this episode I realized that she was different from any other alien – and especially hybrid – we have seen in either the original series or in ST:TNG, and this is one of the things that makes her such an interesting character.

We first find out about her when the Enterprise beams aboard a Class 8 probe carrying a special emissary with a high priority mission. As Riker and O’Brien open the probe’s casing, Dr. Pulaski takes medical readings of the probe’s occupant who unquestionably appears to be Klingon. Pulaski, though, is puzzled by the readings. She admits to K’heylah’r that they are atypical for a Klingon, to which K’heylah’r simply smiles, stating, “No doubt because I am only half Klingon. My father was Klingon. My mother was human.”

There is very little interaction between K’heylah’r and other members of the crew aside from Worf, so it is difficult to further assess how others responded to her “alienness.” It is clear, however, that one of the reasons Starfleet chose her to head the mission – which involved a pre-treaty, warlike Klingon crew just coming out of suspended animation – was that she physically appeared to be a Klingon and the Tong’s crew would not question or challenge her on that basis. In addition to that, she would have firsthand knowledge of Klingon behavior which could only help her if the crew of the Tong had already revived.

There are other indications of her Klingon nature as well: her attire, her choice in calisthenics, her interactions with Worf, especially in their lovemaking. In short, in almost every external respect she appears to be a Klingon.

K’heylah’r, though, despite what we would consider overwhelming evidence to the contrary, does not consider herself to be Klingon. While acknowledging aspects of her dual heritage, she is the only hybrid or alien we have seen who considers herself to be human. She tells Troi that she grew up feeling trapped between worlds and indicates that she seems to have gotten the worst traits of both, the wicked sense of humor from her mother and the terrible Klingon temper from her father. But while she acknowledges and uses that sense of humor to

interact with the people around her, including Worf, she refuses to allow the Klingon side to emerge, saying, “That I keep under tight control. It’s like a terrible temper. It’s not something I want people to see . . . My Klingon side can be terrifying, even to me.”

It is also interesting to note that in all her discussions with the Enterprise – a predominantly human group – she continually refers to herself in the same grouping as them and not with the rest of the Klingons. Her statement to Riker in the conference room, “The point is, this is beside the point. These are Klingons, at war with us,” (underline mine) This gives reinforcement to the fact that she does not consider herself to belong with the “aliens.”

The strongest indication of her feelings, though, comes after she and Worf make love. This action is a marital mating between a Klingon man and woman, and Worf, who does consider K’heylah’r to be Klingon, prepares to take the oath that will seal their bond. She refuses, though, declaring, “It was what it was, glorious and wonderful and all that, but it doesn’t mean anything.” Worf: “That is a human attitude.” K’heylah’r: “I am human!”

Nothing we have seen before has prepared us for this. Physically, like Balok or the Harada, K’heylah’r appears to be the “alien,” and she reinforces our perception of that with her behavior. But unlike the others, she considers herself human. One would think that any time she looked in the mirror she would see that she was not human. One would think that when she felt the stirrings of her Klingon blood in battle and with Worf that she would again realize that she was not human. Spock, despite his knowledge of his human half, was still physically and mentally predominantly Vulcan, and so it is understandable that he should consider himself such. K’heylah’r can make no such claim for her human side.

We can only speculate about why she should feel this way. It is likely that she was raised in the Federation, as even Klingons of the 24th century are not likely to look favorably on hybrid children, considering them to be weak. It is also possible that her human mother took care of her much more than her Klingon father under the circumstances. We are given, however, insufficient information to speculate much further. She does not speak in any depth about her parents or how she was treated as a child by others, or anything much at all about her background beyond the fact that she is a hybrid. The only thing we do know is that she was in the Federation at least six years before, since she was involved with Worf – who most likely was finishing up at the Academy then – at that time, but that is not enough in itself to explain her situation. This lack of information makes her all the more fascinating as a character, and that much more complex.

This also opens the door for speculation as to how non-human hybrids are to be viewed and how they view themselves. Saavik, Spock’s protégé introduced in “Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan,” is half Vulcan and half Romulan. Considered to be Vulcan by others since the Romulan Empire is a sworn enemy of the Federation and she is currently not only living in the Federation but also serving as a member of Starfleet, she is torn inside between her different halves. We know that she was raised on Hellguard, an abandoned colony of the Romulans where halfbreed children were left to die, until she was rescued by Spock. She desperately wants to be Vulcan for him but is constantly fighting her emotional, aggressive Romulan half. No matter

which side she chooses, though, she will still be the alien to us. For her, the decision is between which of her alien heritages to embrace, which, for her, is the more dominant.

One also has to wonder at the Borg, first introduced in the ST:TNG episode “Q Who?” They are a mixture of natural and artificial life, far more advanced than are we. We would probably consider them more machine than man based on their appearance and ability to interact with and through their ship, even though they start off as a natural life form and have to tie their implants directly into the humanoid brain. No one as far as we know (until the third season’s cliffhanger where Picard became the Borg spokesman) has ever spoken with one of them to get their opinions on anything, and so we can once again only speculate as to how they must view themselves.

What, then, makes an “alien?” If we accept Webster’s criteria, that anybody originating in another place or another planet would be considered one, we only scratch the surface. K’heylah’r’s choice reminds us that the way we view others, and especially ourselves, is a complicated thing. Though both physically and behaviorally different from humans and considered “alien” by them, she considers herself to be human, and who are we to say that her choice is any less justified than Spock’s or Troi’s?

Perhaps that is the message of this character. “Alien” is a term that most often is applied externally, but it is one that must come from the inside. We select and choose who we want to be based on how we view our own reality. It is not a “right” or “wrong” decision, merely different for each of us, and as long as we are comfortable with the decision made, it is of little consequence what labels or constraints others would wish to place on us.