Chapter 12
Multiculturalism, gender and eugenics: social themes in Star Trek

I say to you my friends ... even though we face difficulties of today and tomorrow ... I STILL have a dream ... Free at last ... Great God Almighty we are free at last ... I've got some difficult days ahead, but it really doesn't matter to me now, because I've been to the mountaintop ... and I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land.
(Martin Luther King, speech made to the Civil Rights march on Washington, 28 August 1963)

From its earliest days, Star Trek has been informed by a multiculturalist vision in which Martin Luther King’s famous ‘dream’ of complete racial integration has become a reality. In his original outline for the series, Gene Roddenberry insisted that, by the twenty-third century, racial discrimination would be seen as a regrettable relic of the past. The presence of Uhura, Sulu and Chekov on the bridge, as well as a number of black actors who appeared as senior Starfleet officials in the original series, clearly established Star Trek’s anti-racist standpoint, even if all these characters played relatively minor roles. Roddenberry regarded the presence of a leading alien character on the deck of the Enterprise as essential, and fought hard against initial network resistance to keep Spock in the series. Such a presence was for him crucial in demonstrating that the Federation was a multicultural organisation. But the Vulcans were only the first of the many different alien races to be created, each with their own cultural and ethical viewpoints. With racial prejudice extinct on its ‘future-Earth’, Star Trek has always used conflict between the various
alien races to present stories that reflect on contemporary racial conflicts.

The theme of racial prejudice is one that a number of Star Trek episodes explore. In The Undiscovered Country the anti-Klingon prejudice displayed by Kirk and other members of his crew was heavily criticised by Roddenberry (who had little control over the movie) as being untrue to the 'real' spirit of Star Trek in which racism only exists between alien races. Yet even in the original series anti-alien prejudice does not appear to be completely unknown in Starfleet. In Balance of Terror Lieutenant Stiles, who has fought the Romulans in battle, displays a decidedly racist attitude towards Mr Spock because of the close physical resemblance between the Vulcan and Romulan races. But, in a plot resolution typical of the original series, Spock's heroic actions finally persuade Stiles to trust him. Any hint of a lack of 'perfection' among Starfleet officers is thus swiftly quashed. This is in sharp contrast to a new Trek episode like TNG's The Enemy, in which Worf refuses to give a blood transfusion to a dying Romulan on grounds of racial hatred, or the many DS9 episodes in which O'Brien (who, like the earlier Stiles, is a battle veteran) has to fight hard to control an inbuilt prejudice against Cardassians. In TNG's The Drumhead a Starfleet officer who claims to be part-Vulcan has chosen to hide the fact that in fact he has a Romulan grandparent. This tends to suggest that even in the highly tolerant society of the Federation, recent enemies tend to be regarded with a suspicion that may even tend towards racism. Yet such manifestations of prejudice are clearly labelled as aberrations from the Federation's moral code.

Much of Star Trek focuses on how Starfleet deals with conflicts between various warring alien races. The original series' Let This Be Your Last Battlefield, with its rather crude portrayal of a futile life-and-death struggle between the last members of two 'reversed' half-black/half-white races, has an obvious anti-racist subtext. But the most memorable 'multiculturalist' episodes of the original series tend to be those in which the crew is presented with new life forms which may at first appear to be different from human beings but are soon shown to have surprisingly similar characteristics. Such episodes did much to redefine Star Trek in its early days as a new kind of popular science fiction. Many of the low-budget, teen-orientated SF thrillers of the 1950s – such as The Creature from the Black Lagoon or The Beast with a Thousand Eyes – ended with the 'terrifying' presentation of a 'monster' which the heroes had to eliminate. In one of the earliest Star Trek stories, The Man Trap, Kirk kills such a 'scary monster'. The Devil