To Professor Belli,

 I am writing this while I write my actual paper because of frustration and further procrastination. Although it’s not really procrastination when I have to write this reflection paper as well. So I am just working on another part of my project.

 If this semester has taught me anything, it’s that it was foolish of me to think I can hold a job and go to school full time and be successful. Maybe if my job made it possible for me to work on homework and stuff while doing performing my duties will I have had a chance, but who am I kidding, I would have used that time to procrastinate. Still, a job left me little time to work on school, not to mention that I was busy 7 days of the week with either school or work. There are people that are far busier than me and can hold it all together, but a person still needs rest periods. It is all a part of growing up and has helped me appreciate the free time I get. This feels like I am just making excuses for my poor work, but it’s true that the job took a lot out of me and affected my performances. I won’t make that mistake for the semesters I have left.

 Now that all my excuses are done, I can write about everything else. The first part of the project is what caused me the most difficulty, choosing a research topic. Initially I wanted to do a topic related to robots that continue living after humans and the emotional discomfort they bring out in viewers/readers. When I discussed this with you I was told that the topic was too broad and needed to be focused. I thought ok, fair enough. When I gave it more thought I could not think of a way to focus it further. For whatever reason the way to focus the topic eluded me. If I’m being honest I did not give it much thought beyond 10 minutes or so. Reason for this is that my mind kept jumping to other topics I wanted to cover. The effects of a universe’s method of space travel on the people and civilizations that live in it (the topic I submitted), alien hive races, the experience of first contact for human civilizations, what the design of an alien species is trying to portray and more. My mind and thoughts kept jumping as I thought of past stories I have read/watched that I love. I wanted to write about a different thing as I thought about something else that I remembered. This made it difficult to stick to one and focus the topic.

 By the time the second to last week of the final due date came around, I had no proposal. Every Idea that I came up with was just too broad to be worked with. I spent that free Thursday just thinking about what to focus on, but was still unable to focus it as I started to venture into science fiction warfare. It was discouraging hearing that none of my ideas were good enough and that made me upset at myself for being unable to think of something good enough.

It was not until you told me that I could not change my topic that I really started to think deeper into the topic you locked me into, the emotional impact that science fiction has on readers. As I thought deeper into the topic I thought about the emotional impacts that science fiction has had on me. While there was some joy and positive emotions I kept remembering being filled with melancholy and bittersweet feelings, always finding these stories depressing in a way and emotionally draining, but still enjoyable. This brought me back to my original idea of the robot existing past the human race and the emotional impact such stories have brought to me. It also had me wondering why I felt those feelings when the story was just about an emotionless machine existing. With some help from a friend, I managed to pin my topic, why humans (or just me) feel loneliness through machines, which would also involve research on Anthropomorphism. I finally had my topic.

I’m not done writing my paper, still more than half of it left, but writing this reflection is easy and enjoyable as it allows me to put down my thoughts. At the moment I am angry that I was unable to choose a topic until the last week which, with work, only left me about a day to actually work on it. I’ve read some of the research I have found, but when I look at the rest I have not read, I wonder how I will write a decent paper. I do wish I had more time to write this, after all there is still like 2 weeks of class left, but this is mostly my fault and I have to deal with the consequences. This paragraph might not fit here in terms of the flow of the reflection paper, but these are the thoughts that are coming to me now. I’m going to write about some of the things I have had epiphanies about and then leave a paragraph or 2 for when I finally finish my paper.

I have always known I love science fiction. From the libraries in my elementary, junior, and high school I have picked many science fiction stories to read on my own. It’s not the only genre I read as I also remember reading many other types of stories although they mostly kept to fantasy stories as those were the most interesting and fun to read. Still, my love for the genre went beyond books into other forms of entertainment. I always kept an open mind and did not limit myself to 1 genre as there was many things in the world to love, but science fiction was always the genre that caught my attention. My whole ordeal with the proposal has made me realize that I really love science fiction. I mean, I picked a class that focuses on science fiction! I love immersing myself in the worlds that the creators build, watching the conflict between forces that are not limited to human and seeing how technology plays a role. My favorite movies are science fiction, a good number of my video games are science fiction, and Warhammer 40k is my current reading obsession (besides a song of ice of fire) and I’m looking into reading other science fiction literature. I might as well tattoo Sci Fi Nerd on my head, but if I did get it and put it somewhere classier (like Sci Fi Nerd is a classy tattoo) I would wear it proudly.

Another thing that I realized is that I am probably much more emotional than the average person (man?). When reading the stories for class I always felt an emotion, mostly depression, but when I heard my classmates talk about the work as well as read their responses I noticed that barely any of them had any emotion towards the work or at least they did not show it. I would be left drained after reading certain parts to the point where my day would become terrible. A lot of my final project ideas involved some type of emotional response. The topic I’m writing about at the moment is due to my experiences, but is it safe to say that it’s an experience others go through as well? I don’t know, but I write it because too many times have I finished a story being left feeling something, whether good or bad, but always leaving a lasting impact on me. Good or bad, I enjoy being made to feel, to cry or laugh, it’s what good entertainment should do.

I finish this an hour before the due date after spending most of my night writing the research paper. I still have yet to make the power point, but with an hour left, I’ll do what I can. I am not sure how well this paper was written, mistakes were probably made over the night, but I did try to make the best possible paper I could write. I no longer feel angry finally finishing the paper. I actually did learn from my research, on loneliness, anthropomorphism (writing this word was annoying), and why we do it to characters. While writing it was not a great experience, it was certainly a learning experience.

Hope this reflection did not go far off what it was intended for, but it did help me stay sane. Also listening to Michael Jackson and Jackson 5 songs. Really talented singer. Off topic again, but I finish now and hope I didn’t screw up too much. Thanks.

Joel Merino

Professor Belli

ENG 2420

May 14, 2015

The Lonely Robot

 Stories that can invoke an emotional response in their readers are the stories that leave a lasting impact in the memory of the reader. Science fiction is no different, but the emotions associated with reading science fiction are the cold ones, sadness, anxiety, and even loneliness. Normal fictional stories manage to bring about these emotions through real life situations, but science fiction manages to do it all through its more fantastic elements. One of the most prominent elements being robots, which are successfully used to convey human emotions. It is amazing that people can be made to feel an emotion through a being that is incapable of feeling any emotion at all. This paper will focus on the feeling of loneliness portray through robots and how people manage to obtain this feeling through the use of anthropomorphism while taking a look at the works of “Wall-E” and “There Will Come Soft Rains”.

 Why do humans anthropomorphize objects? From living creatures to the shiny toaster, people find a way to give life to objects and intelligence to creatures. Human beings are social creatures, we thrive on social interaction and require other people in order to be truly happy. It is possible that the desire for human interaction is so strong that the necessity will create a source for this interaction as theorized by Epley et al. (144). By seeing another humanlike creature where one does not exist a need can be filled. This need can be the basic need for social connection or the need for control and understanding of the environment (Epley et al. 144). It can be said that anthropomorphism can rise from loneliness.

 Loneliness is an emotion that a person feels when they feel alone, this can happen physically where a person has no interaction with another human being, or mentally in the way a person in a room full of people can feel alone. While it is possible for this feeling to get intense enough to the point of harming a person, everyone feels loneliness in some way through their lives. The feeling of loneliness brings about a great discomfort which is described as being not only unpleasant and uncomfortable, but also unhealthy by Epley et al.(147). Loneliness is usually obtained when a person’s network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively (Pearlman, Peplau, 31). While one of the ways to deal with loneliness is to socially interact with other people, some people fill that hole through the use of Anthropomorphism.

 While not all lonely people put a face on all objects they encounter, lonely people are more likely to anthropomorphize (Ahn, 156). By creating a human out of an object or animal a lonely person can fill the hole of sadness present. They may not do it outright by drawing a face on a plate or giving it a name, but they are more likely to describe such items with a human description. They are also more likely to describe pets as more humanlike as they use them for the emotional support that they require (Epley et al. 148). Although they may not realize what they are doing by treating such an object as a being comparable to a human being It is clear that lonely people are more likely to see the traits of a human being in an object or animal that is not human, but what it’s not clear if the same ideas apply to robots.

 Robots are not living creatures, but are also not inanimate objects. They are objects that can provide the idea of a living creature. Robots that can interact with people are novel entities for which people may not have precognitions (Fussell, Kiesler, Setlock, Yew, 145). This lack of experience can bring out anthropomorphism feelings from people that don’t feel lonely. According to the test conducted by Fussell et al. (150) this was the case. Although this test did not take into consideration loneliness, it took random people and asked them all the same questions. In the rapid fire test (where testers needed to answer question under a time constraint) people would associate human characteristics to both a human and robotic interviewer. When given time to think, this would happen less as people would be able to identify that a robot does not have some emotional capabilities as a human. The test showed that if a robot has a distinct personality (traits programmed into it) people would be significantly more anthropomorphic (Fussell et al. 151). While a person may be able to consciously think that a robot is just a machine with no real emotions, if given no opportunity to think about it, they may think of them as living being.

 Applying the findings of this study to science fiction works shows that robots with a distinct personality can be seen as more alive than those that are nothing more than machines. Stories that create abnormal machines that are unique from the rest of the robots are creating robots that are perceived as more alive by the reader. If it’s the only robot of its kind shown then it can be seen as a character in the story and be more alive than a regular robot. This means that a story that follows a single robot will appear to have traits of a living person. The reader will identify it as a machine if given enough though, but with good writing this moment of pause can be skipped allowing a look into a living being. The following story manages to bring a mindless machine alive to the reader.

 The story “There Will Come Soft Rain” tells the story of a futuristic house surviving a nuclear apocalypse after all humans have died. The story goes through the normal day of the house as it performs its daily duties for the human masters that are no longer alive. The actions of the house are that of a machine with pre-programmed instructions, but they come off as the last strands of hope for the lonely house. The voices calling out for human responses, come off as the cries of someone hoping to hear a response. It’s weariness to the outside world shows a vulnerability, “…it had drawn up its windows and drawn shades in an old maidenly preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on mechanical paranoia” (Bradbury, 2). When the house catches fire and burns down its cries for help are met to silence and shows just how alone the house was. As the story closes the house sends out its death cry in the form of the next day’s date.

The story does a good job of making a mechanical house feel alive, allowing the reader to feel its desperation and loneliness. If human occupants were present the house would have been a tool to be used, but the absence of them allowed the house to shine as a character that was more than a tool, but actually had feelings. It manages to anthropomorphize the house through the words used to describe its actions. This is a difficult feat to accomplish as people are able to identify better with something they see similar to themselves. If not that people have a tendency to anthropomorphize objects and robots that are cuter (Fussell et al. 145). This is taken advantage by a robot named Wall-E.

A recent production that explores the idea of a lonely robot is Pixar’s Wall-E. Wall-E is a science fiction story that revolves around the character of Wall-E, a robot that has spent 700 years on Earth cleaning its pollution until its gained sentience. The story starts off with Wall-E’s lifestyle on Earth as the only living sentient being. Pixar does a great job of keeping the atmosphere light and funny through Wall-E’s actions and the background music even though the Earth that Wall-E lives in is desolate and ruined. Wall-E’s personality is quickly established through his quirks and behaviors, but another things is established, his sentience. Unlike other robots Wall-E demonstrates having that which makes a living creature alive. Even though, it does not make him a living human, but it allows the viewer to care and connect with Wall-E. Any person can understand wanting to be loved, to have a companion, and in this way Wall-E is relatable.

As the story progresses a new robot called Eva is introduced which becomes the focus of Wall-E’s attention. At first this robot seems like nothing more than a machine with a directive, but something as simple as a laugh manages to give life to the machine. As the viewer watches Wall-E watch Eva, they can feel the love that Wall-E feels for this other robot. The viewer wants to see Wall-E be happy, to watch him rise from the hole of loneliness he has been trapped in. The viewer can feel Wall-E’s emotions even when he does not have a face like a human being. Small gestures and larger ones as well camerawork are able to convey the emotion that Wall-E is feeling. In the end when he finally holds Eva’s hand his joy is can be felt through the screen.

“Wall-E” is able to show the emotion that a single robot is feeling through his whole journey, from his time on earth, to his ride on the rocket ship. Small movements such as the bobbing of his eyes or the waving of his hands help show what he is feeling. His likability and cuteness makes it easy for us humans to like him and connect with him making it possible feel what he is feeling from his loneliness to his pure joy. Of course being a work of a science fiction, not to mention being animated makes it easier to bring these robots to life as they are not limited by normal human constraints. Still, seeing a robot with our own eyes makes it easier to identify with it, making it much easier to see it as a living creature and hence anthropomorphize it. In this regard, television and movies have an easier time in portraying the machine, but they also face the challenge of making it more alive.

 Normal people are able to identify with other human beings, placing themselves in their shoes and understand their experiences. When people anthropomorphize characters that are not humans, they perceive them as being alive and humanlike, allowing the reader to identify with them. Robots make this easier as although they are technically not alive, they can be made to appear alive and in some circumstances, human like. It’s no wonder why such stories are able to convey a feeling through something that people understand are incapable of feeling such emotions. An illusion is formed to convince the person that what they are watching is truly alive. When a robot is placed in a situation where it is isolated it allows a reader to portray the feelings of loneliness even though through closer analysis one would know that it’s not experiencing such emotions. So long as the person can be convinced that the machine is alive, even if they don’t realize it, empathy will allow one to understand its imaginary emotions.

Bibliography

Fussell, R. Susan, Sara Kiesler, Leslie D. Setlock, and Victoria Yew. “How People Anthropomorphize Robots.” Carnegie Mellon Uiversity.

Perlman, Daniel, and Letitia Anne Peplay. “Towards a Social Psychology of Loneliness.” Ed. R.Duck and R. Gilmour. London: Academic Press, 1981. 31-56. Electronic.

Ahn, Hee-Kyung. “From Evaluation to Compliance: Anthropomorphism and the Role of loneliness, Trust, Uncertainty and Guilt.” Ed. Toronto: Advances in Consumer Research, 2012. 156-159. Electronic.

Epley, Nocholas, Adam Waytz, Scott Akalis, ad John T. Cacioppo. “When We Need a Human: Motivational Determinants of Anthropomorphism.” Ed. Chicago: Social Cognition, 2008. 143-155. Electronic.

Moskowitz, Sam. “The Robot as a Symbol.” Science Fiction the Greenhaven Press Companion to Literary Movements and Genre Ed. Jesse G. Cunningham. San Diego: Greenhaven Press Inc., 2002. 139-145. Print.

Bradbury, Ray. “There Will Come Soft Rains.” Collier’s: 1950. Electronic.

*WALL-E*. Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2008. Film.