

In an interview with the london saturday review, capek had this to say about the ...

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Response to R. U. R.

The human fascination with creatures who are like us yet different in crucial ways goes almost to the beginning of literary history. Such fantastic creatures as the Cyclops Polyphemus in Homer's Iliad and the Leviathan in the Old Testament show the depths of imagination that people possess.

When Mary Shelley wrote about a creature who was made by man and yet fundamentally different from living people in Frankenstein, she was not only writing about the ways in which the creature would feel alienated from mainstream society; she was also writing about the hubris that making such creatures entailed. Bestowing life had always been seen as the job of the divine rather than the human, and so when humans entered that realm, complications always arose. Karel Capek's R. U. R. was the literary work that introduced the word "robot" into English – and into the science fiction community. While later authors such as Isaac Asimov would ingrain robots more securely into modern culture, it was this play that started it all. Such movies as Westworld, Demolition Man and I, Robot have brought the conversation into the twenty-first century, but without Capek's masterwork, none of these ideas may have ever entered the cultural imagination.

Before entering a critique of R. U. R., it is important to note the state of Western culture in 1920, when the play emerged. The 1800's had been marked by a dramatic change in human society, as what had been a primarily agricultural global economy entered the industrial age. While it took a while for governments to give industry the regulation it needed to provide a safe environment in the West, the general mood was one of optimism – a faith in what humans could achieve. The steam locomotive, the

railroad, electric lights, the car, the airplane, indoor plumbing, and medical advances all portended a twentieth century that would be marked by prosperity and peace. When the Great War came, with the absurdities of mustard gas and of mounted cavalry squaring off against armored tanks, humanity's faith in civilization was rocked by the "brutal impersonality of modern machine warfare" (Morgan, p. 2). Even though technology continued to take off after the Great War, people now viewed that technology with ambivalence instead of optimism. The possible ways in which technology could be abused now began to tarnish the ideas of utopia that technology and science had inculcated before the war began.

I wished to write a comedy, partly of science, partly of truth. The odd inventor, Mr. Rossum is a typical representative of the scientific materialism of the last century. His desire to create an artificial man - in the chemical and biological, not the mechanical sense - is inspired by a foolish and obstinate wish to prove God unnecessary. The product of the human brain has escaped the control of human hands. This is the comedy of science. (Silver iii-iv).

The characters in the play follow this ideological imperative; Domin is the manufacturer, attentive only to the demands of capitalism and blind to consequences or ethics. He is the prototypical mad scientist - but without the science. He is the forebear of characters like Michael Drucker in the 2000 film *The 6th Day* who operate in business without any of the guiding principles of conscience to keep them grounded. Helena, in some ways, serves the story in much the same way that Helen of Troy informed Homer's work centuries before. The only person to survive in the factory is Alquist -

and it is probably his cynicism that keeps him from perishing. The fact that his cynicism saves him has much to say about humanity. The rest of the people in the factory work together as a collective, carrying out the will of management. This mirrors the happy workers in much of the Soviet propaganda that was pounded out from the end of the Communist Revolution until the end of the Cold War.

Even the etymology within the play carries out the author's ideological comedy. The word "robot" is a descendant of the Czech word "robota," which means servitude, drudgery or enforced labor. The actual idea to use this Czech word and turn it into a new concept came from Capek's brother Josef. It is important to note, though, that the robots are not mechanical creatures. They are physically similar to humans, although they have been developed from synthetic protoplasm. The play opens when Domin is dictating letters to Sulla, his secretary, who ends up being a robot. Helena enters; as the daughter of the president, her entry should stir some interest, but instead Domin keeps interrupting her while the two of them deliver the play's backstory. However, in contrast with earlier plays, the purpose of this scene is not necessarily to provide full context; the viewer is expected to understand already that Domin loves Helena. The central process of making robots was mastered by Dr. Rossum; his son made it an industrialized process. It is during the discussion of this part that the viewer learns that "The school books are full of paid advertisements" (Capek). However, while Helena appears to want to bring human rights to the masses of robots, the robots do not appear to have any interest in exercising any of those rights, or even in furthering their own preservation. They just talk monotonously

about their destination at the stamping-mill.

The most depressing part of this part of the play is that Domin and his henchmen are not concerned by Helena's attempt to preach human rights into their workplace: " Every ship brings us more. Missionaries, anarchists, Salvation Army, all sorts. It's astonishing what a number of churches and idiots there are in the world" (Capek). The robots, in other words, not only have no interest in self-betterment, but the words that have been spoken before have no effect. This mirrors the corrosive effect that the events of the Great War had wrought upon the human optimism with which the century had opened.

Other cruelties from the early twentieth century are included in this play as well. Dr. Gall wants to make the process of creating robots painful - for reasons that appear to be industrial, which mirrors the unnecessary cruelty of using mustard gas in warfare and predicts the unnecessary cruelties perpetuated during the Holocaust and the Stalinist pogroms. The crowning irony of the first act, though, comes when Domin proposes to Helena and, even though she professes reluctance, they are soon engaged. The voice of protest has been co-opted by the marriage relationship and forced into submission.

When Act II opens, the scene is the ten-year anniversary party at the home of Domin and Helena. The robots have finally awoken to their oppression and have begun to rebel, and the absurdities in response are the source of the comedy in this part of the play. Instead of a cruise or jewelry, Domin has bought Helena a gunboat for their anniversary present. In the meantime, humanity has become sterile (a fate that would be replicated in many other

dystopian works, including Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and P. D. James' *The Children of Men*), so there is a genuine threat to the robot rebellion. The robots, indeed, have drawn up a manifesto mandating the elimination of the human race, and at the end of Act II, they have surrounded the home.

All of this builds to a highly tense Act III, filled with desperate behavior but strangely lacking in regret over past manufacturing choices. Domin would like to allow the robots to create more of themselves, as part of a negotiating ploy, but Helena has burned all of the instructions. When the power goes out, Alquist is the only one who thinks to imitate a robot in the way his hands move, and so he survives. In the epilogue, Alquist picks a robot named Primus and the robot Helena (which Dr. Gall had created). Alquist terms them the new Adam and Eve and sends them into the night.

The abandonment of the Futuristic enthusiasm for machinery and technology appears to have been a by-product of the Great War, according to the themes at work in Capek's *R. U. R.* By the end of World War II, enthusiasm had been replaced by acceptance; in modern society, people have embraced technology without believing that it will make their lives better in any affective sort of way. This is the sad bequest of the twentieth century - that the optimism with which it began only lasted a decade and a half, even though the technological promise has gone beyond its creators' wildest dreams.

## **Works Cited**

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