

Robots as metaphors for oppression

The origins of robots as we know them

The idea of robots has been an integral part of media for the past hundred years. In this paper, I will be exploring how the fictional existence of robots in popular culture is used as a metaphor for slavery, the working class, and the gender divide. I will focus on different artistic works produced throughout the past century and the lens which the audience and authors were viewing their stories through at the time.

The word “robot” was derived from the Czech word “robota” which literally translates to “slave” or “forced labor”. We first see the word used in the 1920 play, Rossum's Universal Robots (or R.U.R.) by Karel Capek, around the time when machinery and factories were becoming more and more integrated as a large part of the world. The play starts out by explaining how this company came into fruition. Rossum was an eccentric genius with a goal to create his own lifeforms and “dethrone God”. Once Rossum died, his son took over his work, but he had a different idea of what to do with it. In the play, capitalism was corrupting the country and led to mass produced robots for sale in each household. This type of story was told many times later, but its first telling was at this early time period of mass industry and cultural change. During times of great change, artists like Capek use these stories to express the common fear of the future and what it might hold for the common people. The fear of change and the future has always been present throughout human history, but especially during times of immense economic and cultural shifts. Science fiction has always used metaphors like

robots and other supernatural tropes to represent the people's fears considering the future based on how things are looking in society in the present.

The story of the play takes place in the year 2000, where these robot slaves were created to do the human's dull and dirty work, the kind that is considered to be a nuisance and repetitive. We find that as these robots have been integrated into society, the humans have now become lazy even to the point of not reproducing. As the robots become sentient, they realize their superiority over the human race and have an uprising. They no longer wish to serve under a species that has become lazy and unimportant.

Capek witnessed textile factory workers strikes and uprisings during the industrial revolution, and they inspired his ideas and the robots' actions. In the play, this revolt ended in the extinction of the entirety of the human race. This echoes the fears of the people who hold the power that maybe one day, the groups that they "rule" over will fight back. For the ruling class, it must be a terrifying notion that you might lose the power that you so dearly love, that the people you oppress might take back their rights that you so willingly took away from them. From the very beginning, whole idea of robots has always been tied to their inevitable uprising

Other instances of this concept later in the century

In the 1960s, Doctor Who, the British television science fiction show, created Cybermen as robot antagonists. The mission of the Cybermen is to gather humans, brainwash them and strip them of emotions and personality. To make them into robots,

they literally strip people of their humanity. Just as the posters read in R.U.R., “Do you want to make your products chapter? Order Rossum’s Robots.” These posters were representative of how in factories, employers actively sought workers who had “no human needs.” They want workers who are more machines, without human needs or emotions to get in the way of their work. Which, of course, is impossible. In R.U.R., the capitalist CEO was the antagonist. With Cybermen, it was the robots themselves who were depleting the humans of their humanity. It shows how integral personality and emotions are to people. How terrifying to have your individuality, desires, and feelings taken away. If a worker doesn’t have individuality, they don’t have needs and are cheaper labor. That would be a factory owner’s dream but a worker’s nightmare.

Enslavement of the feminine

In the midcentury we see the continued use of robots as metaphors for the enslavement of the feminine as well as other races that we deem as “inferior”. Seven years after R.U.R., *Metropolis*, a German science fiction silent film by Fritz Lang, was released in theaters. This film takes place in a dystopian, skyscraper-riddled, futuristic city where the lower classes are stuck in the depths of the city, while the upper class gets to enjoy the magnificent buildings that were built for them. The film’s main character tries to bridge the extreme class divide between the upper class and the working class in this city. The most famous character of this movie, shown on the poster, is a robot created to convince the workers to start an uprising.

It's noteworthy that they created the robot with a female figure. Robots are created as a tool with a purpose, so the appearance of the robot signals how its creators viewed its purpose. Robots don't need a gender or to reproduce, so why code the robot as being female?

In the 1970s book and movie *Stepford Wives*, we see a similar theme. The men of Stepford want the "perfect" wife, a woman devoid of her own needs who is just to serve her husband's needs. The men replace their wives with robots, who will never age and are programmed to do exactly what the husbands want. The horror of this movie, labeled by the genre, exists again in what a horrible notion it is to lose your rights as a human. In the 1970s, the United States was going through major cultural changes. The ideal of the 1950s housewife was challenged by the women's liberation movement. So *Stepford Wives* uses robots as a metaphor for people being stripped of their rights and humanity. These women are replaced with robot versions of themselves without the rights a human should have.

Conclusion

Through the century, stories continued to explore the idea of our humanity and the enslavement of other human beings through robots. More recent science fiction continues to show "evil" AI as a metaphor for the uprising of the oppressed and the fear of the ruling classes that the oppressed peoples will fight back. These themes are present in hugely impactful newer stories such as *The Terminator*, *The Matrix*, *The Avengers*, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

We as a species have always found ways to dehumanize a group of people in order to make ourselves feel better about whatever it is we are doing to them. We strip them of their humanity the best we can. For example, if a people do not conform to the ruling group's religion's ideals, they don't count as human for one reason or another. It's telling how many stories about robots end with their inevitable uprising against the human race. In every story, eventually the cracks start to show, the reality of what humans have been doing seeps through, and their power can be taken away. For the oppressor, this is terrifying. For the oppressed, this is liberating.

As we continue to write stories in this current state of fear and change that we are living through, these ever-present themes will continue to show up. We will continue to use these supernatural elements to explore the importance of our humanity, and the horror that is losing it.