

"Unrequited Love"

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 28 Jun 2007

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Roy C. Lackey — 28 Jun 2007, 00:05

This is my take on the story. Some of these points have already been made by others.

I think that the narrator is in fact a robot. The reference to "dwarves" refers to his diminutive size. He was a boy robot like Roberta, and of course robot children never grow up like human children. He has been "alive" so long that he can no longer pretend he is a real boy. His human "parents" (human, as indicated by the meat scraps at his home) eventually grew tired of the farce of having a perpetual child (thus "our" house).

Given the "Ro" name thing, the narrator may have been named some unimaginative variation of robot, possibly Robbie.

There are echoes of Cyriaca's tale of the loss of the wild things in human nature to the machines mankind made.

"Either the Robinsons could not have a child of their own, or were unwilling to undertake the travail and expense of a real child. I could not? I do not blame them in the least. But I wondered, because I have never had much to do with such ?bots, about her schooling."

He could not blame them because he owed his own existence to the same impulse. Sending a robot to school is silly on the face of it. It is all pretense, as the narrator knows, and as he proved when a first-grade girl robot knew about square roots.

The narrator was not exactly the Snake in the Garden. His world wasn't a paradise, and Roberta was already aware that she knew far more than human children. Her human classmates would grow up and move on with their lives, whether the narrator intervened or not; it was just a matter of time before she would be confronted with the facts. The narrator already knew the score, having experienced it himself. Roberta was programmed to be smiling and pleasant, the ideal child who could never be real. The real child, Julianne, was not particularly happy; her best friend was a robot.

When the narrator learned that the real girl was getting a fake dog, and vice versa, that is what really set him off. The fake dog would remain a puppy and outlive the little girl, or she would grow tired of it and abandon it, as happened to the narrator. The robot girl's puppy would grow up and die and cause her pain. Either way, the two robots concerned would suffer. The narrator tried to rectify the situation by causing the dogs to be switched, but the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. The dogs, once exposed to their own kind, preferred to remain with their own kind. The girls lacked the dogs' good sense. The real dog was too real for the real girl, and the robot dog's belief that it was really a dog served to remind the robot girl that she, too, was not a real girl.

Robber recognized the narrator as another robot, which is why he wagged his tail and licked the narrator's hand. The real dog could not be fooled by a robot dog. The robot dog had to be

chained to bind him to his human master, making its suffering even greater than it would have been. That is the narrator's only real "sin". Each dog's true love went unrequited, but I think the same was true for the narrator.

-Roy

Jesper Svedberg — 28 Jun 2007, 10:12 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

2007/6/28, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net>:

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I don't think he's a boy robot based on the part you quote below:

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to undertake the travail and expense of a real child. I could not? I do not blame them in the least. But I wondered, because I have never had much to do with such 'bots, about her schooling."

I interpret the "such 'bots" in this section as being child robots. If he was a boy robot, he would himself have gone to school, but if he is an adult robot he would have been created full size and fully functional and then it would make sense for him to be curious to know what an intelligent robot would do in first grade.

There's also the option that the narrator isn't entirely humanoid, but instead some form of household robot or some weird kind of pet.

He could also be a lovebot, such as Gigolo Joe is in A.I. (a movie that has quite a few things in common with this story). I kind of like this theory, since it would fit with naming the narrator Romeo as someone suggested, and since it would add an unspoken love situation between him and his mistress (who perhaps loves him, but to whom he is unable to requite the love, just as the dogs are unable to with the girls).

Someone mentioned the racial issue as well, and I think that sounds very interesting. There is a big difference between racial segregation and robot/human segregation in that racial segregation can eventually be blended away ("Grey if you mean paint. Brown if you mean people.") whereas robots and humans are forever separated. If the narrator wants children (and he seems to like them at least) perhaps being in a sexual relationship with a human woman would be extra off putting, due to its barrenness.

// Jesper

Dave Lebling — 28 Jun 2007, 13:37 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

The Robinsons are humans (but see below) who have a robot child. Julianne's parents are robots (but see below) who have a human child. That's why Julianne is unhappy and mumbles, and her "best" friend is a robot. There are few human children in this "paradise."

The human child gets a robot dog which she is happy with, the robot child gets a living dog which she is happy with. When they exchange dogs, Rover, the living dog, binds with Julianne and wants to stay with her, but Julianne has been socialized to want perfection (the attitude attacked by the narrator's rant against sterile modernity), so she rejects the dog. The robot dog wants to be with the robot girl, because a perfect child can perfectly satisfy a perfect pet; she will know exactly how to maximize the variables that make the pet "happy."

In that sense both dogs are smart enough to want to be with their own kind; they look up to their owner in loyalty and love (or the programmed equivalent). The real dog is too real to see that Roberta is even an owner in that sense, so he is unhappy. Julianne is too real to believe that her robot parents are her parents, so she is unhappy.

The narrator is a human being, and what he means by "our kind" are the people who love sterile perfection, no messes on the carpets, the creators of the modern world. Julianne's parents could be human as well (though I doubt it, name aside) because they are creatures of the sterile "paradise" and can't really love; they might as well be robots if they are not. The same is true of Roberta's parents: they might as well be robots. (Wolfe would ask, what human would accept a robot as a child?) Julianne is only a child and hasn't yet quite lost the ability to love, but she is on the edge.

This ties into Wolfe's interest in humanity's relationship to God as well, in that dogs (in the well-known joke*) see humans as gods. Dogs can recognize God when they see him (or her). Humans are, in this future society (and by extension, our own) too obsessed with the artificial, the human-made perfection of the 1950s SF future that "our kind" (scientists, transhumanists, materialists, ...) is creating. They have been socialized not to bind with God (as Julianne can't bind with Rover).

Julianne can't see that the dog is real and she should love it as it loves her; she is stunted by being the "child" of robots in a society where robots are seen as human. (This is what the color mixing comment early in the story is about: mix black and white and you get grey, mix humans and robots and you get grey. If you mix black and white people you get brown, a real, earthy color. A lot of this story, while inspired by Asimov's robot stories, is in fact a counterblast against them: robots are not human, can't be human, so Asimov's analogy with the civil rights movement is flawed.)

Roberta is programmed to love her human "parents" and her real pet; she is happy because she is doing what she is designed to do, and unhappy when the pet is replaced by a fake one.

-- Dave Lebling, aka vizcacha

* The well-known joke: Dogs say, "My humans feed me, they brush the tangles out of my coat, they can open the door; they must be gods!" Cats say, "My humans feed me, they pat me, they clean my litter box; I must be a god!"

Nigel Price — 29 Jun 2007, 21:29 · follows Dave Lebling

Just thought it worth mentioning in the context of Wolfe's story "Unrequited Love" that P D James' novel "The Children of Men" is about a world in which human beings have stopped having children and the species is in danger of dying out. In the story, childless couples are depicted as sometimes consoling themselves with lifelike dolls which they treat as if they were

children.

The book which, though memorable, was not terribly good, was made into a film recently. I've read the book but not seen the film. Wolfe might or might not have read the book or seen the film but he may well have read a review or heard discussion of the film and been struck by the themes of childlessness and dolls replacing real children. It is after all a slightly strange take on things in that, globally, the population of the world continues to increase rapidly. It is true that some groups are not reproducing at a sufficient rate to sustain their numbers, but their shortfall is more than made up for by others.

Nigel