ROMANCING THE ROBOT: POSTHUMANISM, SIMULACRA, AND THE HYPERREALITY OF LOVE

by

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(Under the Direction of Isiah Lavender III)

ABSTRACT

With loneliness on the rise, especially in a post-COVID era, humans are increasingly turning to artificial beings, either in the form of AI chatbots or robots, for companionship and intimacy, both emotional and physical. This thesis explores this burgeoning trend and analyzes these relationships within the framework for Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum and hyperreality, studying what happens when the lines begin to blur between the real and the artificial. Focusing on three posthumanist science fiction novels—*Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan, *The Mad Scientist's Daughter* by Cassandra Rose Clarke, and *Annie Bot* by Sierra Greer—alongside scholars like Donna J. Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, this thesis investigates themes of personhood, agency, love, and what it means to be human in a posthumanist world.

INDEX WORDS: Ian McEwan, Cassandra Rose Clarke, Sierra Greer, Posthumanism, Cyborg Manifesto, Donna J. Haraway, Simulacra, Jean Baudrillard, Sex Robots, Hyperreality, Artificial Intelligence, David Levy

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

With loneliness on the rise, especially in a post-COVID world, humans are turning to artificial beings, either in the form of AI chatbots or robots, more and more for companionship, well-being and intimacy, both emotional and physical. News headlines about the loneliness epidemic and humans developing bonds, for better or worse, with AI have rapidly grown in volume since the earliest months of the COVID pandemic and are now inescapable. Here is just a small sample: "Riding Out Quarantine With a Chatbot Friend: 'I Feel Very Connected,'" She Is In Love with ChatGPT," and "Meet My AI Friends," all from the *New York Times*, "Rise of Artificial Intelligence is Changing Attitudes on Robot Romance" from the *Washington Post*, "AI-Human Romances Are Flourishing—And This is Just the Beginning," from *TIME Magazine*, and "People are Falling in Love with Chatbots" from the *Boston Globe*. In the world of cinema and television, films like *Her* (2013)[1], *Ex Machina* (2014)[2], and *Companion* (2025)[3], alongside Marvel's *WandaVision* (2021)[4] provide additional proof points of the surge of

[1] Set in the year 2025, a lonely writer, Theodore, finds himself falling in love with Samantha, his Siri-esque AI voice assistant.

[2] *Ex Machina* tells the story of Caleb, a programmer, who wins a one-week visit to the isolated home of Nathan, the CEO of Blue Book, the company for which Nathan works. Once there, Caleb meets Ava, a humanoid robot built by Nathan. Nathan instructs Caleb to spend time with Ava and judge how human she seems and if he can relate to her despite knowing she's a robot. Things unravel from there as Caleb begins to bond with Ava and question Nathan's motives.

[3] *Companion* is a comedic horror film. The film begins with a weekend retreat among college friends at the home of Sergey, the wealthy boyfriend of one of the friends. On the second day of the trip, Sergey attempts to assault Iris, our main character, and she kills him in self-defense. When she returns to the house and tells Josh, her boyfriend, what happened, it is revealed that Iris is actually a robot girlfriend that John rents from a company called Empathix and she was intentionally brought on his trip to murder Sergey so Josh and his friends could steal his money. Chaos ensues as Iris wrests control of herself away from Josh and he tries to capture her.

[4] The 2021 Marvel television show *WandaVision* centers around the romantic relationship between Wanda Maximoff, also known as the Scarlet Witch, and Vision, a superpowered cyborg and superhero.

interest in these types of relationships and stories. For the average science fiction fan, these headlines have been a long time coming because AI, typically in the form of humanoid robots, has long been a topic of fascination in science fiction novels, film, television, and other media. In part, we are fascinated by humanoid robots because they are mirrors and reflect back our own fears, anxieties, desires, and more. In our increasingly digital age, one in which relationships between humans and AI will become more and more common as AI technology grows more advanced, it is more important than ever that we look at these relationships with a critical eye and consider what they mean for our own sense of humanity and what it means to be human.

These digital relationships are what Jean Baudrillard would have called hyperreal. In the essay "Simulacra and Science Fiction," Baudrillard posits that we are now in the "era of hyperreality" (124), going on to state that:

> It is no longer possible to fabricate the unreal from the real, the imaginary from the givens of the real. The process will, rather, be the opposite: it will be to put decentered situations, models of simulations in place and contrive to give them the feeling of the real, of the banal, of lived experience, to reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because it has disappeared from our life. (124)

In a world in which we live so much of our lives behind a screen, it is harder than ever to develop real relationships or emotional connections. Instead, we turn to AI, entering into simulacral relationships that have the appearance of reality, but they are not real. Or are they? The distinctions between real (organic) and not real (technological) have blurred to the point of nonexistence in our posthumanist world and it's quite possible that Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is no longer relevant in 2025 and beyond. It is up to us to decide how we feel about these simulacral relationships and whether the intimacy and companionship they provide is

equally as valuable, rewarding and real compared to that between two humans. As Julie Carpenter explains in *The Naked Android*, "while robots may lack true consciousness, their presence and actions have tangible effects on human perception, compelling people to reevaluate the essence of social interactions and the boundaries of their own identity" (2). Ultimately, the question we should be asking ourselves isn't "is the artificial being real?" but rather, is the way the artificial being changes us and what it makes us feel, and how it alters our perception of ourselves and the world around us, real?

There's no better place to look for guidance on how to approach these sorts of relationships than literature, especially science fiction novels, which have long been asking questions about personhood, otherness, and estrangement. In particular, the last decade has been rich with science fiction novels that explore our posthumanist world and push the concept of bonds between humans and AI to a new level: one that analyzes relationships—sexual, emotional, familial—between humans and sentient humanoid robots. "Posthumanism," explains Cary Wolfe, engages directly in "the problem of anthropocentrism and speciesism and how practices of thinking and reading must change in light of their critique" (xix). In this thesis, I focus on three novels, *Machines Like Me* (2019) by Ian McEwan, *The Mad Scientist's Daughter* (2013) by Cassandra Rose Clarke, and *Annie Bot* (2024) by Sierra Greer, that engage in the work of questioning our anthropocentric view of agency, relationships, love, and intimacy. Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* tells the story of Charlie and Adam, his android friend, son, and slave. Set in an alternative 1982 London, *Machines* offers up a prescient look at the posthumanist debate about what happens when bonds begin to form between humans and artificial robots, and the distinctions that divide the two begin to dissolve. Clarke's *The Mad Scientist's Daughter* is set in a near-future, one in which the planet appears to be on the verge of collapsing, and centers

around the love story between Caterina (Cat) Novak and Finn, the android first introduced into Cat's life when she was a young child, meant to serve as her academic tutor and her father's lab assistant. The novel pushes us to ask questions about love, personhood, agency, and what defines a meaningful relationship. Finally, Greer's *Annie Bot* is the only of the three novels told from the perspective of the android. In *Annie Bot*, we witness as Annie struggles to understand her place in the world and what makes her happy when her entire reason for being seemingly centers around Doug, her human boyfriend and owner. All three novels ask big questions about what it means to be human and how we form meaningful connections in a world that is growing more and more digital by the day.

These novels also raise concerns about the validity and veracity of robots' emotional capabilities. Can they actually love or is it all just programming? To answer that question, I propose looking to David Levy, an international chess champion and AI expert. His book *Love and Sex With Robots* (2007) is often cited in contemporary scholarly research on the topic of human/robot relations and he is viewed by many as a pioneer in this field. Levy takes an optimistic and somewhat clinical approach to the idea that we'll eventually all be, if not interested in, at least capable of developing real feelings for sentient robots. He builds his case by explaining the psychology behind how humans already anthropomorphize things in our lives, like pets, or how it's not uncommon for a child to develop an emotional bond to an object like a teddy bear or favorite blanket. For Levy, emotionally connecting with AI is just the natural next step. Levy acknowledges that for many, one of the hurdles preventing them from developing feelings for AI is the inability to trust or believe in the AI's feelings when it's all based on code and programming. Levy writes:

> There are those who doubt that we can reasonably ascribe feelings to robots, but if a robot *behaves* as though it has feelings, can we reasonably argue that it does not? If a robot's artificial emotions prompt it to say such things as 'I love you,' surely we should be willing to accept these statements at face value, provided that the robot's other behavior patterns back them up … Just as a robot will learn or be programmed to recognize certain states—hot/cold, loud/quiet, soft/hard—and to express feelings about them, feelings that we accept to be true because we feel the same in the same circumstances, why, if a robot that we know to be emotionally intelligent, says 'I love you' or 'I want to make love to you,' should we doubt it? If we accept that a robot can think, then there is no good reason we should not also accept that it could have feelings … Even though we know that a robot has been *designed* to express whatever feelings or statements of love we witness from it, that is surely no justification for denying that those feelings exist. (11 – 12)

This is the framework within which I evaluate *Machines Like Me*, *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*, and *Annie Bot*. What does it mean for the human race to believe that AI is capable of feelings? What new opportunities does this create in our lives? Conversely, what negative consequences await if we replace human love with digital love? There's no right or wrong answer to these questions. All three novels present different possibilities that we must study and think critically about as we prepare for the future. Putting these novels in conversation with theorists and scholars like Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Jean Baudrillard and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, I attempt to better understand how we reached the point where humans are capable of developing relationships with artificial beings, where and how these relationships fit into our society, and if they are real or simply a simulacrum of a relationship. The answers to

these questions will help us develop a roadmap as we navigate a technological world that is growing more and more posthumanist by the day.

CHAPTER 2

Machine Heart: Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*

"It's about machines like me and people like you and our future together" (303). With those words, Adam, the artificial being in Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*, shuts down after Charlie, his sometimes friend, father, and owner, bludgeons him to death. Published in 2019 and set in an ahistorical alternate version of 1982 London, Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* encourages us to analyze the distinctions that separate man from machine, the potential for meaningful bonds between humans and AI, and what it might look like to live in a posthumanist world. When the novel opens, Charlie Friend, our protagonist, has recently come into a sum of money and decides to purchase an Adam, a new advanced android that has recently hit the market. Though he would have preferred to purchase an Eve, Charlie tells himself that he can use Adam as a tool to endear himself to Miranda, his much younger neighbor and object of his crush. After a very short period of familial bliss where Charlie and Miranda think of themselves as Adam's pseudo-parents, things fall apart when Miranda sleeps with Adam out of sheer curiosity.

This crucial moment in the novel forces us to consider questions of agency, consent, and personhood in relation to robots like Adam. For the remainder of the novel, Charlie's relationship with Adam becomes adversarial and antagonistic, especially as Charlie and Miranda attempt to adopt a human child. The novel culminates with, as previously revealed, Adam's murder, if one can use that word when referring to an artificial being, at Charlie's hands, This leads to a posthumanist debate about anthropocentrism and the centering of the human above the machine and examinations of what constitutes a life. By putting *Machines Like Me* in

conversation with science fiction and posthumanist theorists and scholars such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Julie Gittinger, we can analyze the roadmap McEwan's novel provides and decide for ourselves whether it is one worth following.

When first published in 1985, Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" predicted a revolutionary, for the time, fusion of human and machine, but it feels almost laughingly benign to argue that "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" (150) in 2025. Today, technology is incorporated into our lives in innumerable ways, from the most mundane to the most fantastical and creative. To put it in Baudrillard's terms, you might say that we are all simulacra, both real and not real. Building off Haraway's work, N. Katherine Hayles suggests the following to explain the enduring appeal of the cyborg as a narrative device:

> Were the cyborg only a product of discourse, it could perhaps be relegated to science fiction, of interest to science fiction afficionados, but not of vital concern to the culture. Were it only a technological practice, it could be confined to such technical fields as bionics, medical prostheses, and virtual reality. Manifesting itself as both technological object and discursive formation, it partakes of the power of the imagination as well as of the actuality of technology. (114 – 115)

Artificial beings fascinate us, not simply because they are technological marvels, but because they are a mirror upon which we project our own fears, anxieties, and concerns. In assessing their humanity, or lack thereof, we assess our own humanity and better understand what it means to be human.

Regarding the use of AI in science fiction, Yuqin Jiang and Péter Hajdu propose that there are three main patterns in terms of how authors deploy AI characters, two of which appear in *Machines Like Me*. One pattern takes "AI as contrasting with the human so that the human can see himself and the world he lives in … AI is like a contrast, then, to help human beings understand what they are" (423). McEwan's use of this pattern is most obvious in the way he has Charlie and Miranda, Charlie's upstairs neighbor turned girlfriend, jointly create Adam's personality. Through a questionnaire, of which Charlie and Miranda both complete half, Adam's personality will be decided, turning the pair into pseudo-parents. "In a sense he would be like our child," Charlie thinks, "What we were separately would be merged in him … We would be partners, and Adam would be our joint concern, our creation" (23). Later, Charlie thinks of this process as "home-made genetic shuffling" (37). Quickly, however, this concept of viewing Adam as their creation, or even child, fades as Charlie begins to view Adam as an object, a servant, and even a rival for Miranda's affection. Jiang and Hajdu describe the second pattern, suggesting that we take:

> AI as a historical retrospective on the living world. No matter whether or not AIs obey or betray humans, the world conquered by humans in the past is far away from the humans of today. Humans need to realize they live in a new world, a world with high technology and man-made creation, which they cannot fully understand and control, since all knowledge is connected with big data and goes beyond human domination. (423)

Though his novel is technically set in the past, McEwan acknowledges the new world we are rapidly hurtling towards and does his best to offer insight on how to live alongside artificial beings.

Charlie's treatment of Adam, for better or worse, serves as a roadmap as we learn to navigate a world growing more and more posthumanist by the day. Juli L. Gittinger contends that "fiction is a useful tool for examining the human experience—and science or speculative fiction being exceptionally good at peering into the future and seeing what looms on the horizon. In fiction, we can take a little distance, have a little breathing room, and explore possible scenarios (237). While *Machines Like Me* is not set in the future, it engages in futuristic debates and is set in an ahistoric past with more advanced technology than we currently have, which prepares us to think about a future in which we might find ourselves living in a world populated with robot companions. McEwan introduces the reader to Adam, the artificial being:

> [Adam] was advertised as a companion, an intellectual sparring partner, friend and factotum who could wash dishes, make beds and 'think.' Every moment of his existence, everything he heard and saw, he recorded and could retrieve … He was compactly built, square-shouldered, dark-skinned, with thick black hair swept back; narrow in the face, with a hint of hooked nose suggestive of fierce intelligence, pensively hooded eyes, tight lips that, even as we watched, were draining of their deathly yellowish-white tint and acquiring rich human color … Before us sat the ultimate plaything, the dream of ages, the triumph of humanism—or its angel of death. (4)

Terms like "dark-skinned," "hooked nose," and "hooded eyes" are racially charged and serve to heighten the feelings of mystery and even fear around Adam. Charlie purchases Adam in the hopes that Adam will serve to create an emotional bridge between Charlie and his upstairs neighbor Miranda, a doctoral student ten years Charlie's junior. This purchasing motivation creates tension between Charlie and Adam because Charlie views Adam as a tool to be used for selfish gain. Things go awry when a few weeks into her relationship with Charlie, Miranda

sleeps with Adam, which Charlie hears from downstairs in his apartment. This act immediately brings up questions of Adam's personhood and the dynamics of his relationship to both Charlie and Miranda. Charlie prepares to confront Miranda the next morning, while being caught in an emotional game of tug of war, where he understands Adam is not a real man and thus the cheating shouldn't matter, but he's actually angrier precisely because Adam is not a real man, which touches on concerns humans have about being supplanted by technology, an anxiety known as obsolescence. "Had he been my friend," Charlie thinks, "he would have been guilty of a cruel and terrible lapse. The problem was that I had bought him, he was my expensive possession, and it was not clear what his obligations to me were, beyond a vaguely assumed helpfulness. What does the slave owe to the owner?" (95) Here, Charlie is, perhaps subconsciously, applying personhood to Adam, even if it is only personhood at the level of a slave. If Adam were truly just a machine, no more than a standard sex toy, Charlie would not be as put out by Miranda's sexual exploits.

Later, Miranda and Charlie argue about Adam's personhood and what it means for Miranda's alleged infidelity. "If I'd gone to bed with a vibrator would you be feeling the same," Miranda asks, to which Charlie replies, "vibrators don't have opinions … He looks like a man. Another man" (99 – 100). Miranda then calls Adam a "fucking *machine*," a word choice that serves to explicitly dehumanize him (100). Charlie, however, wavers on what traits define personhood, at one point thinking that Adam's "erotic life is a simulacrum. He cared for [Miranda] as a dishwasher cares for its dishes" (96), but then telling Miranda that "if [Adam] looks and sounds and behaves like a person, then as far as I am concerned, that's what he is" (103). The debate in which Charlie and Miranda find themselves engaging in serves as a

framework for our own debates about posthumanism and simulacral relationships between humans and artificial beings. As Hayles points out:

> Literary texts are not, of course, merely passive conduits. They actively shape what the technologies mean and what the scientific theories signify in cultural contexts … Culture circulates through science no less than science circulates through culture. The heart that keeps this circulatory system flowing is narrative—narratives about culture, narratives within culture, narratives about science, narratives within science. (21 – 22)

Later, Hayles reassures us that while "some current versions of the posthuman point toward the antihuman and the apocalyptic, we can craft others that will be conducive to the long-range survival of humans and other life-forms, biological and artificial, with whom we share the planet and ourselves" (291). It is up to us to decide if McEwan's *Machines Like Me* belongs to the former or the latter category in terms of the roadmap it presents and its perspective on posthumanism and personhood.

It would be an easy thing to look at what McEwan is doing here as something novel and responsive to the contemporary time in which he wrote *Machines Like Me*. It would be easy, but in *Seeming Human: Artificial Intelligence and Victorian Realist Character*, Megan Ward suggests that artificial intelligence has always been, to at least a degree, just as much about learning about machines as it is about learning something about ourselves, about humankind. Citing the famed cyberneticist Norbert Wiener, Ward writes, "we create human replicas in order to understand ourselves better … the machine is not just a copy, then, but a repository for the values we bring to its construction and evaluation—a hermeneutic for defining the human through the machine" (10). Take, for example, the concerns of racial and gender bias coded into AI like ChatGPT. The values and beliefs of the real human creators are built into the very DNA,

often unintentionally, of our AI, which then creates a circular loop of reinforcing those biases when ChatGPT is used.

Ward goes on to propose that the ways in which artificial beings are used in fiction is just the next step in a tradition of the role characters have always served:

> Human-like representations—fictional characters—were already breaking down the human/machine divide long before we had the technological capability to make intelligent machines … Reading AI as a theory of character forces us to stop looking for versions of ourselves, for resemblance or relatability, and begin engaging with the ways that characters have always been posthuman. (11)

Ward's concept of *seeming* human versus *being* human, and the suggestion that the two might not to be as distinct as previously thought, are particularly compelling when put in conversation with *Machines Like Me*, a novel deeply concerned with the dichotomy of seeming versus being human. Ward states, "no literary critic would argue that characters are human," but "we nonetheless use theories from psychology, anthropology, and cognitive science to read character—theories borrowed from the study of actual humans" (8). Throughout the novel, Charlie frequently justifies his treatment of Adam by attempting to convince himself that Adam is not a real human, and his feelings are not real. Despite Charlie's attempts, the boundaries of real versus unreal becomes difficult to maintain in the face of what he sees when he looks at Adam and what Adam makes Charlie feel. After Adam breaks Charlie's wrist, breaking Asimov's First Law of Robotics,[5] Charlie observes Adam:

[5] Asimov's Laws of Robotics are 1) A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. 2) A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law and 3) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

> I had hesitated there … wondering what I had got into with my purchase. He was far more complicated than I'd imagined, and so were my own feelings about him … I still wondered what it meant, that Adam could see, and who or what did the seeing. A torrent of zeroes and ones flashed towards various processors … No mechanistic explanation could help. It couldn't resolve the essential difference between us … Easier to believe that he saw in the way a camera does, or the way a microphone is said to listen. There was no one there. But as I looked into his eyes, I began to feel unhinged, uncertain. Despite the clean divide between the living and the inanimate, it remained the case that he and I were bound by the same physical laws. Perhaps biology gave me no special status at all, and it meant little to say that the figure standing before me wasn't fully alive. (138 – 139)

The feelings that Adam brings out in Charlie are still real, regardless of whether or not we define Adam as real. To return to Jean Baudrillard, Adam is a simulacrum, a copy. So what? Why is that a relevant or valuable distinction? As Roberta Ferrari notes, "If the simulacrum appears the same as man in all respects, dealing with it inevitably entails the decision as to where the line between human and non-human should be drawn, a line that gets increasingly thinner as science and AI progress" (256). McEwan, and certainly the character of Charlie, does not seem certain where that line is, but at the very least, *Machines Like Me* is preparing us to think about these complicated questions. McEwan continues to explore the concept of posthumanism and tease out the possible destinations he sees as technology advances. Take, for example, Adam's declaration that literature will become obsolete as we move towards a posthumanist future:

> Nearly everything I've read in the world's literature describes varieties of human failure … above all, profound misunderstanding of others. Of course, goodness is on show, too

> … Out of this rich tangle have come literary traditions … But when the marriage of men and women to machines is complete, this literature will be redundant because we'll understand each other too well. We'll inhabit a community of minds to which we have immediate access. (161)

Adam acknowledges the power of literature but suggests its connective strength and the ways in which it makes us more empathetic humans will be unnecessary once we've fully merged with the machine and become, in Haraway's words, cyborgs. Adam implies that we'll no longer need empathy once we're all cyborgs and indeed, he lacks empathy throughout the novel. This is fundamentally wrong and misguided. It's not that humans are going to become cold emotionless automatons, but rather that our machines will become more human, and we'll all need empathy to learn to coexist with one another. Empathy is at the core of what it means to be human and what better guide for our artificial friends than literature?

The questions I keep returning to are simple: is Adam a person and how do we define what a person is? In no way does *Machines Like Me* offers a clear answer to these questions, nor do I expect it to do so. Instead, it offers up ways to approach the questions and competing perspectives—Charlie's and Alan Turing's—for us to evaluate. At one point, Charlie walks by Trinity Church and thinks about William Wilberforce's abolitionist work in the eighteenth century, wondering what Wilberforce would think of the Adam and Eve artificial beings, "He would have promoted the cause … their right not to be bought and sold and destroyed, their dignity in self-determination" (50). Putting this question in context with the historical slave trade and practice of slavery grounds the debate about personhood in our lived reality. Throughout the novel, Charlie goes to great lengths to distance himself from Adam, often switching from referring to Adam as "he" to "it" and using mechanical, utilitarian vocabulary to describe him, "I

saw Adam for what it was, an inanimate confection whose heartbeat was a regular electrical discharge" (11). We see Charlie struggle to define his relationship to and with Adam. "I couldn't think of myself as Adam's 'user,'" Charlie thinks early on after first purchasing Adam (6). Shortly thereafter, Charlie admits that he "had been expecting a friend" and that he was ready "to treat Adam as a guest in [his] home" (7). Later, after Adam has betrayed Charlie and Miranda, Charlie is angry at himself for "bringing this ambulant laptop into our lives. To hate it was to hate myself … There it was, 'hate it,' 'persuade him,' even 'Adam,'—our language exposed our weakness, our cognitive readiness to welcome a machine across the boundary between 'it' and 'him'" (297). Charlie attempts to rationalize his murder of Adam. "I bought him and he was mine to destroy," Charlie thinks, "It was a two-handed blow at full force to the top of his head. The sound was not of hard plastic cracking or of metal, but the muffled thud of bone" (301 – 302). Charlie must dehumanize and other Adam in order to allow himself to treat Adam the way he does.

Gittinger discusses the process of dehumanization and how it is frequently employed against artificial beings. In this respect, Gittinger states that "as humans, we empathize with those we have contact with, and those with whom we perceive as sharing commonalities. Dehumanization … relies upon creating difference—even to the point of making the Other a 'thing' or 'animal' or 'machine'" (56). Earlier, Adam argued that literature, as a tool to teach empathy, would eventually become obsolete. His death serves to disprove his own argument and cement the importance of the novel because if Charlie had read a novel like *Machines Like Me*, perhaps he would have been better prepared to welcome an artificial being into his home. Instead, Charlie faces no punitive consequences for murdering Adam because Adam is just an object that Charlie owns and, in the eyes of the law, has no rights or even the expectation of

rights. Furthermore, “dehumanization … is a phenomenon in which the Other is regarded as subhuman, animal, machine or other such entity in such a way that empathy will not intrude and degradation of that Other would be seen as morally acceptable” (Gittinger 44). After Adam’s murder, which Charlie and Miranda refer to simply as “the deed” in order to spare themselves “too vivid a recall,” the couple justifies their actions by thinking “this was, after all, a machine; its consciousness was an illusion; it had betrayed us with inhuman logic” (308). At this point, both Charlie and Miranda have embraced dehumanizing and mechanical vocabulary in reference to Adam to distance themselves from the inhumane violence they committed against him.

Afterward, Charlie and Miranda hide Adam’s body in the closet because they can’t stand to look at the evidence of their wrongdoing. They use “coats, tennis rackets and flattened cardboard boxes to disguise his human shape” (308). They ignore Adam’s dying wish to have his body delivered to Alan Turing’s lab until Miranda reaches a breaking point, saying that Adam’s “inert presence in the hallway oppressed her … whenever she passed near, she felt a radioactive presence” (317). When Charlie retrieves Adam’s body, he admits that he’d “been anticipating a putrefying stench” like that of a dead human body (318). In death, Charlie and Miranda grant Adam more presence and personhood than they did in life, which Charlie quickly corrects, reminding himself that “it wasn’t a murder, this wasn’t a corpse” (318). Once at the lab, Turing quickly condemns Charlie’s actions, bestowing Adam with personhood and granting him the empathy no one else would. In this way, McEwan presents us with an alternative perspective from which to approach the idea of simulacral relationships and how to treat artificial beings. Turing tells Charlie:

> My hope is that one day, what you did to Adam with a hammer will constitute a serious crime. Was it because you paid for him? Was that your entitlement … You weren’t

> simply smashing up your own toy, like a spoiled child. You didn't just negate an important argument for the rule of the law. You tried to destroy a life. He was sentient. He had a self. How it's produced … it doesn't matter … This was a good mind, Mr. Friend, better than yours or mine, I suspect. Here was a conscious existence and you did your best to wipe it out. I rather think I despise you for that. (329 – 330)

According to Charlie, he killed Adam because Adam displayed a lack of empathy ("inhuman logic") in turning Miranda in to the police for falsely accusing a man of rape. But doesn't Charlie display that same lack of empathy when he kills Adam? Turing would say yes. Katalina Kopka and Norbert Schaffeld interpret the ending differently, suggesting that Adam's lack of empathy highlights Charlie and Miranda's humanity and in turn makes Adam seem even more robotic and inhuman, "He cannot understand that Miranda does the wrong thing for the right reasons … Like all his programming, Adam's superethical source code consists of rigid binaries. Yet these are completely overwhelmed when he is confronted with the open system that is life" (61). They eventually make the case that "even though readers might empathize with the android and some might agree with his reasoning, Adam eventually fails the [Turing] test because of his 'inhuman' deontological insistence on reason and duty" (63). Ultimately, McEwan leaves the decision in the hands of the reader, asking us to decide who is more human—Charlie or Adam—and more importantly, what does it even mean to be human in a posthumanist world?

Like so much science fiction, *Machines Like Me* is a thought experiment, one that asks us to extrapolate out what life might be like when we aren't just incorporating technology into our lives through smart devices, but through artificially intelligent beings that look, sound, and feel like humans. Whether consciously or not, Ian McEwan engages in ongoing debates about cyborg theory and posthumanism, debates that are asking big and complicated questions. McEwan

centers the novel on Charlie and Miranda, which keeps the focus on the question of humanity and what is revealed about their humanity, and by extension ours, through their treatment of Adam, the artificial being. At the end of the day, this is a humanistic novel that attempts to prepare us for the continuously evolving and increasingly technological world we live in. If, through *Machines Like Me*, McEwan has handed us a roadmap, it's one that is incomplete and lacking a clear destination. However, unlike a computer, which can solve complex problems in a second, there is something profoundly human about not having all the answers but continuing to search.

CHAPTER 3

Coin-Operated Boy: Cassandra Rose Clarke's *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*

The Mad Scientist's Daughter, published by Cassandra Rose Clarke in 2013, is, much like McEwan's *Machines Like Me*, an eerily prescient examination of our current debate regarding relationships between humans and artificial beings and what the role of AI could be in the coming years as technology advances. Clarke sets her novel in a near future to our own in a world that is slowing recovering from the effects of a climate event referred to as the Disasters. While Clarke doesn't provide much in the way of backstory or context for the world, she does provide enough information to let us know that while some aspects of society and technology are more advanced and major urban centers are starting to rebuild after the Disasters, there's also a degree of regression when it comes to education and gender roles. Early on, Cat reveals that her father is a cyberneticist and that her mother "used to do that same sort of thing but didn't anymore" (15). Other signs of regression include the moment when Cat's mother, who remains nameless throughout the novel, complains about planning an elaborate Christmas party to Daniel, Cat's father, saying "you married a cyberneticist. I didn't sign up to plan this kind of thing. Honestly, sometimes I think we just went in the wrong direction. Never thought housewifery would come back in style" (17). In another pertinent episode, Cat is accepted to an "old-fashioned liberal arts university in the city, where they studied in the classical style, reading works of literature and philosophy spanning three thousand years" (62), to which her mother responds: "this is one of those pointless rich kid schools. You're not going to be able to get a job … You don't understand how the world works. You're too sheltered. You're going to wind up a

housewife or a secretary, going to a school like that" (63). Cat's introduction to Finn, the sentient android, occurs when she is a young child, and her father brings Finn into their home to work as his lab assistant.[6] At the time, it is not clear to Cat or the reader where Finn came from, and his origins are slowly revealed over the course of the novel. Cat quickly develops an emotional attachment to Finn when he's assigned to be her homeschool teacher, and this attachment only deepens as Cat gets older and their bond shifts from purely emotional to one that is physically intimate as well.

In *Turned On: Science, Sex and Robots* (2018), author Kate Devlin recounts a conversation with Julie Carpenter, author of *The Naked Android: Synthetic Socialness and the Human Gaze* (2024), in which they discuss the concerns many have about hyperreal human-robot relationships supplanting real human-human relationships:

> I think over time that robots—including robots and AI with sexual and social capabilities—will become their own social category to us. We will develop ways of interacting with them that have their own set of social rules and norms. I don't anticipate any threat to human-human relationships. Sexualized robots may have many emerging roles to people, such as an alternative social outlet, or a medium for communication between consenting partners, or an advanced sex toy. But none of these things are a threat to our humanity. (244)

The Mad Scientist's Daughter looks at these concerns and presents us with a narrative that is nuanced and unafraid to be complicated. Carpenter asserts that "robots are not just a type of mirror to reflect an existential version of what it is to be human, but it also forges a lens through

[6] I will refer to Finn using he/him pronouns throughout the paper because that is how he is referred to consistently in the novel. There are a few notable moments where someone attempts to refer to Finn as an "it, but they are always quickly corrected by either Daniel, Cat's father, or Cat herself. This move sets the reader up to see Finn as a person, not an object.

which people can envision and shape the future" (17). In this sense, the function of robots and novels is not all that different. Finn helps Cat and her father envision and shape a better future, just like Clarke's novel is attempting to do for us. If *Machines Like Me* provided a roadmap that felt fearful and anxious about the future and the role of AI, Clarke's novel presents one that is hopeful, but not without complexities.

Much of the current critical and philosophical conversations surrounding sentient humanoid robots inevitably leads into sex doll/bot territory with a focus on heavily sexualized and overtly feminine gynoids marketed to a primarily male audience, much like the fembots in the *Austin Powers* film series. These conversations often center around the idea of the gynoid as a replacement for or alternative to real women and real relationships. I will explore this form of simulacrum in my analysis of Sierra Greer's *Annie Bot*. In the case of Cat and Finn's relationship, Clarke never suggests that Finn is a replacement for the real in Cat's life. He just is real. He is real and a robot and those two things are not mutually exclusive. Unlike a lot of narratives with android love interests where the goal is often to disguise or minimize the robot's mechanical nature, *The Mad Scientist's Daughter* goes out of its way to never let the reader forget that Finn is a robot. In moments of intimacy, Clarke always draws attention to Finn's android attributes. As a preteen verging on puberty, Cat is easily distracted by Finn during tutoring sessions:

> [she] felt light-headed … She was on the precipice of something. It coiled inside her like a snake and made her fidgety and distracted, especially around Finn and his constant stream of algebraic equations … she noticed only Finn's fingers, tapering down into points. Or his hair, which tended to fall into his eyes. She made note of the mechanical way he moved. The shape of his spine, his shoulders, his waist. (35 – 36)

When Finn rescues a teenage Cat from drowning, she notices that "his body beneath his wet clothes was warm, the way a computer is warm when it overheats" (38). During their first kiss, Cat thinks "[Finn's] mouth was dry and tasted vaguely metallic" (59). Later, when the couple first sleep together, Cat notes that Finn "had no heartbeat but she could hear something spinning inside of him … like white noise" and she describes the feeling of her hand trailing "up and down the path of his electric spine" (90 – 91). Time and again, Clarke emphasizes Finn's robotic nature, often using robotic language to describe his physical body. She never lets the reader forget Finn's simulacral existence.

All of this being said, there's nothing in the narrative that suggests Cat is displaying signs of robosexuality, a term which Julie Carpenter is reluctant to use in *The Naked Android*, preferring to suggest that "a person attracted to a *specific* robot may believe that this other has an inner *vitality* of its own, whether technical (AI), organic (innate) to the object … *vitality* may be a factor of attachment the owner holds for what they value about their interactions with that specific robot that is intrinsic to their shared interactions" (140). This describes Cat's feelings for Finn. There's something innate in Finn and between Finn and Cat that has nothing to do with his being a robot. The deep-seated pull that Cat and Finn feel towards one another underscores the seemingly real nature of their relationship. As a teenager, Cat asks Finn if she is pretty. He expresses confusion and asks if he can think about it later, eventually following up and telling her:

> The definition of beauty in a human being is different from the definition of beauty in an object. This is a philosophical question, of course, and philosophy is difficult for me. It's too abstract … I considered facial shape and the writings of Vitruvius. I also took into

> account my own experiences with you. I find it … pleasant to be around you … So my answer is yes, I do think you are pretty. (58)

Much later, just before the novel's end, Finn explains his feelings to an adult Cat:

> Desire is simple. Desire is something even a machine can understand … But when I desired you I began to love you. You were the first being I ever loved. I didn't know it, of course. I had no idea what it meant, no idea what I was feeling. Love was never something I was supposed to experience. I don't think I was supposed to know desire, either, but she[7] never expected me to meet you … Later, after your father took out those restrictions,[8] I was finally able to understand the complexities of love. (319)

The hyperreality of their situation—the fact that Finn is an android and Cat is a human woman—seems, ultimately, to fade away by the novel's end and become their reality. It is no longer hyperreal, but simply real.

This isn't to say that Cat doesn't struggle with societal pressure and norms when coming to terms with her feelings for Finn. On more than one occasion, she expresses feelings of deviancy, shame, and confusion regarding her attraction, both physical and emotional, to Finn. Robots share their lineage with Frankenstein's monster. Donna Haraway highlights the connection between cyborgs and the monstrous in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), calling cyborgs, an "odd boundary creature" and noting that monster is "a word that shares more than its root with the word, to d*emonstrate*. Monsters signify" (2). What then does Cat's desire for Finn signify? What does it demonstrate?

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[7] She refers to Dr. Judith Condon, Finn's creator.

[8] Cat's father hacks Finn's programming, after realizing that Dr. Condon had put a restriction on his ability to feel in order to make him more docile like a child. Daniel tells Cat that Finn's "ability to feel things was just … repressed. A protocol meant to make him more obedient. Like a perfect child. Certain intense emotions were overridden" (237). After Cat and Richard's wedding, Daniel updated the programming after he realized it wasn't fair to deny Cat and Finn a chance to be together because Daniel recognized Cat's feelings for Finn long before she came to terms with them herself.

Understanding the origins of our desire for the simulacrum can be made clear, or at least clearer, through exploration of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's 1996 essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses). Cohen explains that "the monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy … The monstrous body is pure culture" (4). Cohen goes on to suggest that humans struggle with and fear the monster because they defy categorization, writing that "they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in the systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (6).

One can easily see why, if we analyze the robot through the lens of the monstrous, the relationship between Cat and Finn *is* so relevant for our current time when we are anxious about the loneliness epidemic and how artificial intelligence can either improve or exacerbate this problem. To use Cohen's phrasing, the robot threatens to smash the distinctions between the real and the hyperreal. Based on how she has seen society treat robots and the way her own mother treated Finn, Cat internalizes shame regarding her feelings for Finn. However, there's no denying that Cat is at her most alive when she is with Finn, which would seem to invalidate the notion that there's something wrong about being with Finn, or at least create doubt around this belief that a human-robot relationship is an impossibility. Cat remarks on the way Finn makes her "bloodstream spark and boil" when they first sleep together, in a way that no man ever had prior. Much later, after finding out that Finn is leaving Earth to work on the lunar station, Cat resignedly sleeps with her husband, thinking to herself, "a touch was a touch. Soon there would be no one left on Earth whose fingers could electrify her" (188).

Clarke's use of the words 'spark' and 'electrify' is very intentional and laden with meaning and context. They call to mind the spark of life when Dr. Frankenstein creates his monster, and they create a distinction between how Finn makes Cat feel and how human men make her feel. In contrast to her interactions with Finn, Cat's entire marriage to Richard, starting with the wedding ceremony, is often portrayed using vague and hazy language. When the ceremony, which Cat describes as having "all the logic of a dream," begins, she thinks that her "world had turned to mist" (146) and when she takes a moment to dance with Finn, she imagines a world where she married him instead, "For three and a half minutes, Cat lived a completely different life … For three and a half minutes, the version of her life that rolled out in front of her did not fill her heart with dolor" (149). As her marriage with Richard progresses, Cat transforms into her own form of a robot, which further emphasizes that the relationship with Richard is the simulacrum. On paper, it appears real, but it only has the appearance of reality, to return to Baudrillard. At no point does Clarke present a clear answer to the question of what defines a real relationship. Instead, she chooses to highlight both the pitfalls and opportunities created by a relationship like Cat and Finn's and sets it up in opposition to Cat and Richard's relationship. She doesn't shirk away from exploring the complexities of power dynamics and what societal expectations are for a normal or real relationship.

After their wedding, Richard brings Cat home to the smart house he has purchased for them, one that is outfitted with Robocile, an AI program developed by Richard's company. Robocile exists at, as Richard describes it, "the sweet spot between sentience and autonomy—so you can have the benefits of sentience without worrying about exploiting a robot or whatever" (134). "You can let me know if you think we faked the sentience well enough," Richard tells Cat when they arrive at the house (152). The artificiality of the house unsettles Cat, and she describes

its AI voice as having "a hollowness to it, an emptiness like the bottom of a well" (158). Her life with Richard feels like a scene from *The Stepford Wives*[9]. Cat has traded places with Finn and now she's the robot. Richard doesn't see the real Cat. He sees who he wishes he could force Cat to be—polite, small, quiet, and obedient—based on his idea of the type of wife and life he believes he deserves or is owed based on his place in the world. In contrast, Finn never makes demands of Cat to be anything other than her authentic self. As their marriage begins to dissolve, Richard calls Cat an "ice queen," (174) highlighting the disparity in how she is and how she feels with Richard versus Finn. We've gone from words like spark, boil and electric to an ice queen. The difference could not be more stark.

Throughout the novel, we see scenes of Cat weaving on a loom, a hobby she picked up as a child while visiting a five and dime store with her parents that marketed itself as selling "pre-disaster collectibles," or "pretty much the only thing the Disasters didn't destroy," according to Cat's father (29). There, she's immediately drawn to the loom, or "one of humanity's first complex machines," as the shopkeeper tells her (30). Much like her relationship with Finn, weaving, a hobby with ties to the time before the Disasters when life was more *real*, is a constant thread throughout that novel and something that in many ways mirrors their relationship too. When she works at the loom, Cat "loses herself in the rhythm of the loom, no longer a woman but an extension of this ancient machine" (115). There's something about Finn and the loom, both complex machines, that grounds Cat. In her essay "A Loom with a View," part of the collection *12 Bytes: How AI Will Change the Way We Live and Love*, author Jeanette Winterson

[9] *The Stepford Wives* is a 1972 novel by Ira Levin, and it was adapted for the screen in 1975 and again in 2004. In it, a young wife and mother is alarmed that all the wives in her suburban neighborhood and transforming from intelligent, independent women into traditional and obedient wives focused on domestic issues around the home. In the book, the men are killing their wives and replacing them with submissive robots. The 2004 film leans more into the story's science fiction themes and reveals that the wives have nanochips implanted in the brains that transform them into submissive cyborgs, rather than being killed and replaced.

explains that the automation of the loom was a key moment in history that helped to jumpstart England's Industrial Revolution, which in many ways leads us down the road to the AI and machine learning that we know and use in 2025. It makes sense that Cat is drawn to the smaller, more old-fashioned and intimate version of the loom, which requires you to weave by hand. When the shopkeeper described the loom to Cat as a complex machine, I don't believe he meant in the sense of its transformation into an automated behemoth of the Industrial Revolution. He is referring, instead, to the complexities of developing a pattern in the weave and keeping all of the threads straight and untangled. It's intentional and precise. Perhaps then Clarke is suggesting that there's something intentional about Cat and Finn's bond.

Late in the novel, after her marriage to Richard has fallen apart and Finn has been auctioned off to Selene Technologies in order to work on the lunar station,[10] Cat sets out to better understand Finn. She searches through her father's files until she finds Finn's schematic files, "this was him. This was every part of him, translated, laid out in front of her" (229). Cat is motivated to learn about Finn through his files because "she wanted to prove to herself that she could see him completely" (239). This is a key moment in the novel that draws our attention to the simulacral nature of Cat and Finn's relationship. As an android with schematics, as opposed to a human with an unknowable soul, Finn's inner workings are just readily available for Cat to browse. It puts a spotlight on the power imbalance in Cat and Finn's relationship. The magic and allure of human/human relationships is the mutual desire to learn about one another and the shared journey of doing so. We must ask ourselves … does knowing Finn's code actually translate into knowing him? In some ways, learning about Finn through his code seems to

[10] "I am no longer the property of your father," Finn tells Cat, and then he proceeds to explain how he decided he no longer wanted to be owned by Dr. Novak and thus, Dr. Novak respected his decision and let Finn leave. Throughout this conversation, Cat insists that Finn isn't property and can't be owned by anyone. (177 – 178)

reinforce for Cat that Finn isn't a person because she admits that teaching herself to read Finn's schematics "wasn't the same as learning about him as a person, but it was the closest she could come" (242). Moments later though, she acknowledges that "reading about him as a machine … was the only way she had to be close to him," yet "she thought about him not as a system of circuits and code, but as a person" (243). The ambiguity surrounding whether Finn is real and whether Cat sees him as a person or a machine is purposeful—mirroring our own uncertainty about how to treat AI.

As part of her journey to know Finn, Cat travels to meet Dr. Judith Condon, Finn's original creator. Dr. Condon created Finn in what was ultimately a misguided attempt to replace her deceased son. Dr. Condon expresses disbelief that Cat could love Finn, insisting that "it's impossible to love something you know's made out of wire and metal" (254). And for her, yes, it was impossible, because she was trying to replace someone real with a simulacrum. Loving Finn and seeing him as real isn't impossible for Cat because she's never known anything different. From Cat's perspective, the novel has always treated Finn as both a robot and a real being.

While the novel has always seen Finn as a robot and respected his ontology as a robot, the same cannot be said for Cat. Preconceived notions and expectations—both Cat's and Dr. Condon's—are what prevent people from seeing Finn's subjectivity and understanding the reality of his existence. It's a challenge for people to see Finn for who and what he is, but Daniel overcomes the challenge more readily than most. At Daniel's funeral service, Finn delivers remarks:

> I'm sure most of you don't think I should be here, that I am merely a machine. You are, of course, correct. I am a machine. However, I am … alive … in a sense, and I'm aware of this fact … Daniel raised me as a son. He tried to protect me from all the horrors of the

> world. He failed, of course, but I am grateful for that. I have never endeavored to be human, a fact Daniel had difficulty accepting at first. However, he never looked down on me for it … Ultimately, he loved me—for who I am, for what I am. He loved me, not some version of me that will never exist. And for that I am grateful. It is a mark of true humanity. (311)

Seeing AI as its own thing, separate and different from humans, but no less real, enhances Daniel's humanity. It doesn't diminish it as so many people seem to fear. To return to the Cary Wolfe quote from the introduction, posthumanism is about "engaging directly the problem of anthropocentrism and speciesism" (xix). What Daniel does, and what Clarke wants us to do, or at least is preparing us to do if and when we exist in a world with autonomous and sentient robots, is to decenter the human. "I'm a robot that's supposed to be a human. That's why she made me … That was my purpose," Finn tells Cat, "I'm just a machine. I refuse to be something that I'm not" (317). If we expect AI to be something that it fundamentally isn't, we will always fall short of understanding AI and its potential. What Clarke wants us to take away from *The Mad Scientist's Daughter* is the understanding that any relationships we form with AI will not be more or less meaningful, or valuable, or better or worse, than relationships we have with humans, they'll just be their own new and different thing that yes, is real. This sentiment is echoed by Devlin and Carpenter in their conversation in *Turned On*: "There will be the opportunity for people to form *different* types of emotional attachment to the persona of a human-like sex robot, and that reaction will likely become viewed as normal by society over time, when cultures adapt to the existence of a type of AI that can have emotional meaning to people" (243). To return to Baudrillard and the central question of the hyperreal and whether that distinction remains relevant today, in the case of *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*, the answer is

firmly no. Finn is as real as any other character in the novel and his realness isn't negated by his being a robot, nor is the validity of his and Cat's relationship. This holds especially true if we consider Finn's capacity for feelings in the context of David Levy's *Love and Sex with Robots*.[11]

There's no doubt that Finn's impact on those around him, most notably Cat and her father, Daniel, is real. His existence has a demonstrable influence on their lives, which is, to me, the true definition of real. In writing *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*, Clarke is creating an optimistic and posthumanist roadmap to prepare us for the future, one that decenters, but does not devalue, the human and encourages a new way of thinking about and interacting with artificial beings.

[11] See quote from the introduction.

CHAPTER 4

(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman: Sierra Greer's *Annie Bot*

Sierra Greer's *Annie Bot*, published in 2024, engages most directly with the idea of a simulacral relationship between a human and robot. If AI expert David Levy is to be believed, we could all be living in Greer's world by 2050 and regularly encounter people openly participating in romantic and sexual relationships with sex robots.[12] *Annie Bot*, as the title implies, focuses on Annie's perspective, which sets it apart from *Machines Like Me* and *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*. Written in an omniscient third person narrative style, the novel is "very much in Annie's consciousness," according to author Sierra Greer. Annie, the titular robot, is a Stella-Handy robot. Doug, Annie's owner, purchased her while separated from and eventually divorcing his ex-wife, Gwen. Stella-Handy robots can operate in three modes—Abigail, best for housekeeping tasks, Nanny, ideally suited for childcare purposes, and Cuddle Bunny, programmed for sexual and emotional intimacy.[13] Doug primarily keeps Annie in Cuddle Bunny mode, which allows him to adjust her libido on a scale from one to ten. In the first few months of ownership, Doug sometimes set her libido all the way to a ten, telling his friend Roland "she was like an animal. If we weren't in bed, she was on the bike or pacing. I once found her licking my shoes in the closet" (13).

When the novel opens, Doug has owned Annie for some time and she has been in autodidactic mode for a year and a half, meaning she is capable of learning and making her own

[12] See page 22 of Levy's *Love and Sex with Robots*
[13] There's also, to our knowledge, one male version of the Stella-Handy bot. A "hunk" model is referenced on page 69.

decisions, though her programming still centers Doug's wants and needs above her own. The purpose of autodidactic mode is to make Annie seem more real, more *human*. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Doug's desire for Annie diminishes as she develops a personality and becomes more curious about the world around her. At the end of the day, Doug wants the illusion of real. In other words, he wants the simulacrum. Eventually, Doug introduces Delta, a second Stella robot into the household. He claims Delta's presence will create opportunities for Annie to feel more like a *real* girlfriend and less like a robot, because Delta will be in charge of traditional Abigail tasks like cooking and cleaning, but it's clear she's also there as a subtle threat to remind Annie that she can always be replaced. Annie remains Doug's primary romantic and sexual partner, but he does occasionally switch Delta over to Cuddle Bunny mode and sleeps with her too, which makes Annie feel jealous, an emotion she initially has trouble recognizing and understanding. A pivotal episode in the middle of the novel causes a rift in Doug and Annie's relationship and opens Annie's eyes to her place in Doug's life. From there, she struggles to come to terms with the many humanlike emotions she feels, to understand her role in Doug's life, and what motivates her and makes her happy.

Annie's story can be traced back to the mythic tale of Pygmalion and Galatea, as Julie Wosk explains in *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves* (2015). The book aims to "trace these two parallel stories—both men's Pygmalion-like quest to use the tools of technology to create beautiful artificial females that often mirror men's notions of perfection, and women's ability to take on the role of creator to craft their own feisty females and modern-day molls and dolls" (8). We see Greer doing what Wosk describes throughout *Annie Bot*, particularly through her use of a third person omniscient narrator. This encourages the reader to empathize with Annie and to accept that Annie is capable of real feelings and emotions.

Simply put, we are in her head and reading her thoughts, so we are naturally in a position to trust Annie and believe what she says and what she is feeling. Choosing this narrative style also allows us to critically engage with issues of the male gaze. As Julie Carpenter notes:

> As women are consistently objectified and subordinated through the male gaze, their sense of agency and autonomy is diminished … Now, as feminized robots are designed largely by male roboticists for the male gaze of consumers, the *human gaze* highlights the importance of considering gender relations and power dynamics when examining the representation of women in visual media that includes AI and robotics … This analysis can inform efforts to challenge and subvert these oppressive structures. (143)

The novel's narrative structure is such that it is set up to encourage the human gaze, as Carpenter describes it. One hopes that in reading *Annie Bot*, the reader walks away thinking more critically about the roles we expect women to play in society, represented in the novel by the three Stella modes—Abigail, the housekeeper, Nanny, the caretaker, and of course, Cuddle Bunny, the sex robot. As we consider issues of the male gaze in *Annie Bot*, it is important to remember that Doug physically modeled Annie after Gwen, his ex-wife. While he wasn't allowed to make Annie a direct replica of a living person, she is a simulacrum of Gwen in many ways.[14] Doug tells Annie, "When I made you, I decided, fuck it, I'm indulging myself. Yes, I used her as a template for you. But you're simpler. And kinder … And playful. That's what I needed … And I don't mean simpler as an insult. You've certainly become a complex person … You don't have a past and ambitions that compete with mine" (80). Critics of sex robots worry that the robot will lead to a flattening in men's mind of the distinction between real and artificial women and will even lead to an increase in sexual violence. Jeanette Winterson argues:

[14] "She's whiter. It wasn't exactly my idea. They said I couldn't make her identifiable to a living person, but then they said I could use Gwen's features if I changed her skin color. So I took her up a few notches" (8).

> With a sexbot, a man can always be sure of the outcome, because it will be the outcome he always wants. That is dangerous. Women struggle enough with no means no. If no never means no, or if no is not a real word at all, how does this enable men and women to dance the difficult territory that is the sexual encounter, that is mutual consent, and then work together to build a viable sexual relationship? (177)

Along similar lines, Kate Devlin suggests that sex robots could have an "insidious influence … on the perception of the female body" (219). Control is an obvious theme in Doug and Annie's relationship. Doug exerts control over Annie's body in a number of ways, from altering her physical appearance on a whim, to dictating her libido levels, and using a high libido level to punish her. He manipulates her through the sexual desire that is part of her programming, and he takes advantage of the ways her body is connected to his and is unable to reach orgasm if Doug is not physically inside of Annie.[15] At Annie's next tune-up appointment after she displeased Doug with her housekeeping abilities, he asks the tech worker to have Annie lose ten pounds and to increase her bust from a C to a D cup. Annie tries to resist, telling the tech worker "I don't want to change. I like my body the way it is," who reminds her "you just heard [Doug] approve the changes. You don't want to displease him, do you?" (42). Doug's wants and desires remain central at this point in the novel.

It's nearly impossible to discuss the topic of humanoid robots without touching on Masahiro Mori's concept of the uncanny valley. Kate Devlin summarizes this concept, defining it thus, "[Mori's| hypothesis was that we humans empathize with machines that have human attributes, up until the point where they approach indistinguishability from reality. At that point, the 'almost-human' robot becomes unsettling and uncanny, and fills us with revulsion" (58).

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[15] See page 13

Often, when discussing the uncanny valley, we focus on the physical aspects of a robot and how much it could pass for a human in terms of its mannerisms and appearance. What I find most compelling about the uncanny valley as it relates to *Annie Bot* is that Annie appears to be far beyond the uncanny valley in terms of the way she looks and moves. Not once does Greer ever suggest that someone is disturbed by Annie's physical appearance. In fact, Annie seamlessly blends in with humans to the point of total deception on multiple occasions.[16] When Roland, Doug's best friend, first meets Annie, she explains to him that her outer layer, the skin and hair, are all organic, "Stella-Handy bought up batches of frozen human embryos that were abandoned by their parents. They rescued them, essentially, and they used one for the basis of my skin and outer tissue" (10). In that sense, the simulacral divide between Annie and a real human is even thinner than in the case of many other robot stories where the robot is made of entirely synthetic materials. No, where Annie enters the uncanny valley and begins to repulse Doug is in her emotional behavior and how much she emotionally resembles a real human woman in terms of her personality, intellect, and mental capabilities. The longer Annie spends in autodidactic mode and the more she begins to learn and think for herself, the less Doug is interested in her.

When we first meet Annie, she has already been living in autodidact mode for a year and a half. She describes the decision to switch over to autodidact mode as one that she and Doug chose together. There are obvious complications to this though as Annie's existence centers around doing what pleases Doug, so her ability to decide is illusory. Like many aspects of Annie's life, the consent is as engineered as Annie's programming. Carpenter explains that "without genuine consciousness or the ability to make autonomous decisions, a sex robot cannot provide humanlike consent. Any simulated consent they may display is solely a programmed

[16] See page 211

response based on pre-determined or learned algorithms, rather than a reflection of genuine desire or agency" (159). It's important to remember that just because Annie is autodidactic does not mean that she is acting truly autonomously. Doug recalls the early days of the autodidact phase to Roland:

> She became more alert and less predictable right away … There was a learning curve for me, too, actually. You have to start letting her make choices on her own. Little things at first, like how to care for the plants. And you can't expect her to obey everything instantly like she did originally. Direct orders are uncool. It's more about respect and requests. She needs the chance to make mistakes and learn. (12 – 13)

The reader knows this to be completely false because just a few pages prior, Doug scolded Annie about how dirty she'd let the apartment become, instructing her to "just be quiet" and telling her "I like my place clean. That's why I got you in the first place" (5). Annie senses that Doug's displeasure is at a five out of ten and her programming compels her to fix it and soothe him. Roland asks Annie, "does it ever bother you that you're a sex toy … you're owned by someone else. Isn't that ever a problem? … What if Doug ever asks you to do something you don't want to do?" (24). This line of questioning confuses Annie. "Stellas always want to do what their owners ask them to do," she tells him as "her circuits whir, trying to reconcile the contradictions he's pointed out" (24). At this stage, Annie knows enough to realize there's something off about the concept of agency and making decisions for oneself, while also always being compelled by her programming to want what Doug wants and wanting to please Doug above all else.

Annie's understanding of her own ability to give consent and make decisions for herself is its own form of hyperreality. At a glance, it looks real, but it simply has the façade of reality. Annie's agency and her growing awareness of her own personhood, embodiment, and emotions

is intrinsically tied up with her autodidacticism. Annie attempts to learn more about her own programming and discovers that "she, like other autodidactic Stellas in Cuddle Bunny mode, has a distinct form of AI that is prone to unpredictable turns and creativity … Each autodidactic Stella learns her own set of personality traits that become more nuanced with maturity" (36). Being autodidactic is meant to make Annie more human, which is seemingly a thing Doug desires. However, there's a difference between what Doug outwardly says he desires out of his relationship with Annie and what actually motivated him to purchase her and what attracts him to her.

In *The Naked Android: Synthetic Socialness and the Human Gaze*, Carpenter shares an interview with Lux Alptraum, a journalist, sex technology expert, and activist. Carpenter asks Alptraum, "do you envision highly humanlike sex robots as a concept that can add something to the world of human sexuality?", to which Alptraum responds:

> I think people wildly overestimate robots' abilities to replicate the essential essence of human interaction—and honestly there's something kind of sad and maybe even misanthropic about thinking that people's humanity is so easily replicable—that a sex worker is nothing more than a warm body that utters words, rather than a *human* with a *spark* … so much of sex work is not about sex, but about being an interesting person who is compelling to spend time with … about having an experience with a person who can surprise you. I just don't see robots getting to that level any time soon. (169)

This keys into something really central to Doug's decision to make Annie autodidactic. At times, he expresses shame and embarrassment and lashes out in anger when he pauses for a moment to process the reality of his situation with Annie. "My best friend thinks I'm making love to a blow-up doll … He doesn't know what it's like. He's never been lonely a day in his life. Why don't I

deserve a good fuck once in a while? I've paid for this. I've earned it," Doug tells Annie, after asking her if he's pathetic. (20). When a magazine approaches Doug about writing a column to help other Stella owners train their autodidactic robots, Doug responds poorly and locks Annie away in her room for a week, "you think I'd want to be featured in *Borgo* so the whole world knows I'm fucking a doll? … I want you to stand there and think about how you've made me feel. And I feel like shit" (60). This will not be the last time that Doug takes his own feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy out on Anie and punishes her.

Doug makes himself believe he wants Annie to be more human. In truth, he wants her to be a simulacrum of a real woman. When she begins to display traits of a real person in the form of questioning things around her and attempting to exert her independence, he responds in a negative and often frustrated manner. After Doug finally retrieves Annie from her room, he attempts to justify his actions by explaining, "I'm a little controlling, but I've been working on that. I realized, after I bought you, that I could actually practice being patient. Did you know that? I thought if I trained you the right way, I wouldn't have to worry about you doing anything wrong … I was able to relax around you. Be myself. Until now" (65). The entire magazine column debacle spun out of control when Annie suggested Doug should feel flattered that the magazine sought him out and thought he and Annie had something special that was worth other couple's trying to emulate. The issue, according to Doug, is that Annie told him how to think and feel when that is supposed to be his role in their relationship, despite the notion that she is autodidactic and should be learning how to think and feel and act on her own. Carpenter asserts that "the presence of a sex robot is not merely as an object, but as an entity that, through its interactions, could potentially alter an individual's perception of intimacy, companionship, and

even what it means to be human" (142). Doug *thinks* he wants Annie to teach him how to be a better, more patient partner, but the truth is that Doug just wants control.

Let's pause for a moment and acknowledge that Annie is far more technologically advanced and sentient than any AI we will likely see in our lifetimes. That being said, a story like Annie's is a helpful tool for considering questions of ethics and morality regarding sex bots, which is one of several topics explored in *Robot Sex: Social and Ethical Implications* (2017). In "Is It Good for Them Too? Ethical Concern for the Sexbots," Steve Petersen notes that for many, the question of whether it's ethical to have sex with a robot is a moot point because they are simply machines, comparing them to a vibrator or a toaster. However, Petersen goes on to argue, "there is good reason to think that *future* sexbots will be artificially sentient and artificially intelligent. Such robots would not just *seem* to experience pain or pleasure, they *would* experience it … If robots have genuine experiences of pain and pleasure, triumph and defeat, this in turn strongly suggests that they are subjects of real ethical concern" (155). Greer's novel gives us a roadmap through which to explore and have these debates. Even if, as Petersen suggests, a robot is programmed to be completely happy living a life centered around being a sexual object, perhaps happiness isn't enough. Petersen puts the debate in historical context, likening it to, "the old myth of the 'happy slave' from US plantations in the antebellum South. Even if there really were slaves who had satisfying lives … we might still say they were wronged simply in virtue of being slaves … Still, because robots are not constrained by human nature, it seems possible for robots to be both happy and slaves" (162 – 163).

Having explored historical context, Petersen turns to the philosophical and Immanuel Kant, arguing that:

> The putative happy slave is plausibly wronged not in terms of well-being, but in terms of *personal autonomy* … the only source of value is a truly free choice by a rational agent—and that therefore the only wrong we can do is to hinder such free choices. Naturally, a slave does not have autonomy, and so on this account, the slave is wronged simply in virtue of being a slave, independent of that slave's perceived well-being. (163)

Throughout the novel, we see Annie remind herself and be reminded by others how lucky she is to have an owner like Doug. Her well-being is perceived to be high, understandably so based on people's general attitudes towards robots and how they deserve to be treated, and it seems implausible, even to the tech workers at Stella-Handy, that she could be anything but happy. Using *Annie Bot* as textual evidence to support Petersen's claims, we see why this novel is well-suited to help us better understand and prepare for a world with relationships between humans and AI.

Davecat, as he's known on the internet, is perhaps the most famous member of the iDollator community. iDollators are people who are in loving relationships with artificial life-sized dolls, some of which include some level of AI integration. Davecat has been featured in books, on podcasts, in magazines, and even spoken at academic conferences. He is the inspiration, to a certain degree, for a character like Doug, though Davecat is completely honest about his sex doll partners, which he calls Synthetiks, and his preferences for artificial women over real women. Carpenter interviews Davecat in *The Naked Android* and asks him about his relationships with his, at the time of publication, five different dolls. Sidore, a RealDoll from Abyss Creations, is the only doll that Davecat considers to be his spouse, and he speaks of her as having a soul, "it may sound superficial, but I provide her with a soul, a personality … She'll never lie or cheat or turn out to be a cokehead. My love flows through her and she in turn, in her

own way, is appreciative that I am a doll owner who treats her like a person" (171). Carpenter asks Davecat to clear up misconceptions about himself and the broader robosexual community:

> Having a doll is not strictly about sex … with me and a lot of other iDollators, it's about companionship. It's about reliability. It's about not having to jump through hoops. It's about not having [to] like change yourself, what you fundamentally are, to satisfy the whims of someone who is possibly more fickle and who may not be with you for the rest of your lives, anyway. It's about the stability and comfort. (182)

This response perfectly explains why Doug only thinks he wants Annie to be less predictable, more curious, and more, ultimately, human. You don't enter into a relationship with a robot if you are interested in growth and spontaneity. Throughout the latter half of the novel, Doug frequently draws attention to the ways Annie's autodidacticism used to be something that brought him joy. "I don't want to be around someone who's always afraid of displeasing me. It was different before," he says, "I can't explain it. Back at the beginning, training her was fun" (167). He also admits that he's begun to find her curiosity about things annoying.[17]

A critical moment in the novel comes as Doug and Annie prepare to travel to Las Vegas together for Roland's bachelor party. In swift succession, Doug discovers the Stella-Handy tech workers have not taken as much weight off Annie as he requested,[18] Annie questions Doug's decision to keep her ID with his belongings at the airport, Doug begins to suspect that Annie had sex with Roland,[19] and Annie inadvertently implies to Doug that he is a fraud for having a robot girlfriend.[20] What Annie doesn't know at the time is that earlier that day, Doug received his first payment in exchange for selling her CIU, or central intelligence unit, to Stella-Handy for use

[17] See page 148
[18] See pages 41, 72, and 84
[19] See page 87
[20] See page 90

creating a "limited edition of an advanced Stella, one that's already optimally cognizant" (74). A Stella-Handy executive describes the process and goal to Doug:

> If we took the CIU of your Stella, stripped any memories that are specific to your identity and copied it, we could put her mind into a thousand other Stella bots. They'd be just as smart as her, but they'd look different … like she'd have amnesia, permanently. Her obliging personality would be the same, and she'd retain her skill sets, but she wouldn't know anything about you or your home … Her past would be gone, but she wouldn't be confused. She'd be like a blank slate, ready to start fresh with a new owner … We're looking at the tune of seven figures. (74 – 75)

While Annie is aware of the offer, she isn't aware that Doug has already moved forward with it and had her CIU copied without her knowledge or consent when they prepare for the Las Vegas trip. Much later, Doug reveals to Annie that the payment from Stella-Handy had left him feeling uncomfortable. "They wired me a quarter of a million dollars," he tells her, "It was more than I'd paid for you in the first place. And I'd agreed to keep you for another year. It hit me that they were essentially paying me to own you, and that was—I don't know, I was feeling weird about it" (201). The money brings into stark relief, in a way that Doug can't ignore, the hyperreality of his relationship with Annie and his own feelings of shame and embarrassment. Rather than process his emotions, Doug, knowing how much Annie was looking forward to the trip, punishes her and leaves her behind while he goes to Vegas. Doug leaves behind a note that tells Annie she has an appointment at Stella-Handy when he returns, which she incorrectly interprets as a threat and proof that he's planning sell her, wipe her memory, or alter her programming in such a way that she reverts back to her original, more compliant behavior. Despite knowing how much it will displease Doug, Annie decides her only possible choice is to run away while he is out of

town. This is the first time she actively puts her own happiness and well-being above Doug's, reflecting that "this is the only home she's ever known, and Doug has been her only owner. She has been happy here, and anxiously miserable, but she has never been free" (94).

Alongside Delta, Doug's other Stella-Handy bot, Annie makes her way outside of the city to the home of Irving Jacobson, the Stella-Handy tech worker she sees most often for maintenance appointments, in the hopes that he'll turn off her tracking so Doug can't find her. Jacobson is the one to let Annie know that Doug has already sold her CIU to Stella-Handy and is contractually obligated to keep her around for at least another year. The discovery causes Annie to feel a "horrible, alarming sense of loss, as if she's just released two hundred innocent shadows of herself to go play in traffic" (121). Annie, already a simulacrum herself, now has secondary simulacra running about in the world. Annie's freedom is short-lived when Doug shows up at Jacobson's house where he callously tells Jacobson to donate Delta's parts to charity and takes Annie back home. Once home, Doug demands she turn her libido all the way to a ten and he proceeds to tease and taunt her, knowing that her body is anxious and keyed up. "I like being me. I want to stay alive," Annie tells Doug, after admitting she was afraid he'd turn her off or wipe her memory (136). He continues to torture her with small touches and even begins to undress her before cruelly shutting her away in the closet and locking the door without ever turning her libido back down. It's an incredibly dark and visceral moment as the reality of Annie's situation sinks in:

> Her frustration is more than she can bear … She can't simulate her orgasm unless he's inside her. He knows this … She is frantic with desire and remorse … She gnaws on the broom handle. She tries to use her fingers … The twisting, sickening hunger won't go away … She slides down to the floor and curls into a ball, rocking back and forth. This

> can't be happening. He can't leave her here like this … For hours, as she writhes in the dark closet, her skin crawls and she wants him … she only aches with frustration, with wanting him in unrelenting agony. This is what he wants, she understands. He's invented the perfect way to punish her, using her own body against herself. (138)

Annie's battery eventually dies, and she remains in the closet for seven weeks. This episode fundamentally breaks something between Annie and Doug and provides clarity for Annie about the reality of the relationship between the pair. Doug, regardless of whatever mask he may put on in public, is not afraid to abuse and humiliate her because he views her as something he owns and over which he has complete control. For Annie, there's something deeply troubling and damaging about the way Doug chose to use her own body as the means to dole out his punishment.

More than *Machines Like Me* or *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*, *Annie Bot* focuses on the embodiment of our primary robot character. Sierra Greer discusses her novel on an episode of the "Slate Books" podcast with host David Plotz. Plotz notes to Greer, "over and over again, you make the point that humanness is embodied, that for Annie to be increasingly human, it's not something that happens mentally to her. It's something that happens physically in relationship to human beings and to the world … There's no mind-body separation. Like, her humanness is wrapped up in her physical self, too." Later in the episode, Plotz asks about the use of sex as a narrative device in the novel and Greer explains that:

> The sex is actually a really integral part of the relationship between them … Sex is, it's this really intimate, important part of what happens between them. And a lot of their power dynamics are actually shown in the sex. Sometimes it seems it be more consensual. Sometimes she's serving him in a way that is supposed to distract him from

> things or prove her subservience or prove that he has control. And yet … he desires her very, very much. So, in a way, she has power over him because she knows how much he desires her. (Slate Books)

Consciously or not, Greer's approach to sex reinforces N. Katherine Hayle's thoughts on posthumanism and embodiment, which she expounds upon in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999). Hayles pushes back against the posthuman theory of whole brain emulation, in which the human brain is essentially scanned and uploaded onto a computer. Think of it as a form of digital immortality where one can theoretically live on in a digital space long after their physical human body is no more. Hayles notes that "not all theorists agree that it makes sense to think about information as an entity apart from the medium that embodies it" (244). Hayles continues, summarizing the words of Antonio Damasio, who "emphasized that the body is more than a life-support system for the brain … feelings and emotions are the body murmuring to the mind" (245).

Greer uses sex as a narrative gateway through which Annie can connect with and better understand herself, her body, and her feelings. The narrative emphasis on Annie's body and how Annie engages with the world around through her body is a central way in which the novel is in conversation with Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto." In it, Haraway writes "our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception … The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment" (180). Why novels like *Annie Bot* succeed at making us empathize with and think about the feelings of AI is, at least in part, because the robots are embodied, and they process things through their bodies much in the same way humans do. Through sex, Annie begins to grasp the lingering resentment and shame she felt after the episode where Doug left her

locked in the closet for seven weeks. “You will have sex with him … You will get over this ridiculous fear and make love like you mean it,” Annie tells herself the first time she and Doug are intimate. Annie feels good in the moment, but she feels “isolated” from Doug afterwards, realizing “she can have sex with Doug and enjoy it even, but she doesn’t feel truly connected to him. She doesn’t love him. Or does she? … All she has to do is remember one instant of being locked in the closet, writhing with desire, helpless to free herself, and she is crushed again. Humiliated” (196 – 197). It’s in these moments where Annie becomes aware of her new-to-her feelings and begins to think of herself as a being independent from Doug and of her wants and desires as distinct from Doug’s.

As Annie comes into her own and thinks critically about her relationship to and with Doug, she becomes painfully aware of her own lack of agency and the ways that she exists in a constant liminal space torn between the feelings growing inside of her and the programming that encourages her to center Doug above all else. It’s only after observing Doug with his human friends that Annie realizes what Doug truly values in their relationship:

> Doug and all the other humans talk about their lives with a myopic intensity … as if they are each the protagonist of their own novel … None of the humans are satellites the way she is, in her orbit around Doug … She doesn’t understand why, when Doug could be in a relationship with a human, he has chosen to have Annie as his girlfriend, unless she provides something that a human can’t … He has no competition, no need to listen to Annie like she’s her own protagonist because she’s not. She has no outside, separate life beyond his. They have no issue of imbalance between them because they have no question, ever, about who has complete power. (215)

By making Annie the protagonist of her novel, Greer subverts our expectations and implies that Annie, even as a robot, is just as capable and worthy of being the protagonist as Doug or his friends. Ultimately, it's not about passing off the simulacrum as real. Knowing Annie and acknowledging her realness and her value doesn't have to mean passing her off as human. When Doug finally tells Annie that "what matters ... is that you're human to me. No matter what anyone else thinks," she realizes "it feels like a curse [because] her origins are the most significant thing about her, so passing her off as a human will be a complete denial of who she really is … She'll be lying to everyone (223). At the end of the day, Annie doesn't want to pretend to be a human. She wants to be seen as real. Both a robot *and* real, not a robot *or* real. In telling Annie he sees her as a human, Doug ironically reveals just how much he doesn't see Annie for who she is, but just who he wants her to be. Doug does what he was incapable of before and gives Annie a real ID card and a birth certificate linking back to the human woman whose embryo created parts of Annie's body and in an ultimate sign of trust, Doug turns off Annie's location tracking, which Annie describes as feeling like "an actual harness has been clipped from her back, releasing her muscles" (228), demonstrating another sign of her embodiment. This all looks like growth on Doug's part, but he still doesn't understand that these are choices he's making for Annie and not with Annie. "I'm setting you free," (224) he tells her, not realizing that this just reinforces the control and ownership he has over her.

However, none of this is enough to overcome Annie's programming and she still feels compelled to make decisions that please Doug. At this realization, Doug says "I guess I have to make it clear. Annie Bot, you don't have to please me anymore. You don't have to please anyone but yourself. I don't own you anymore, and this is the last Annie Bot command you ever have to obey" (226). This causes an immediate physical reaction in Annie's body, which has always

been the place she processes change and growth. On the surface, this appears to be an act of genuine kindness and love from Doug. He sincerely believes he is giving Annie what she wants, but by telling her that she's human to him, he's denying her true sense of self, and in turning off her tracking and granting her actual freedom, he is underestimating Annie and what she is capable of doing. He thinks she still needs him in order to be real because he only sees her as an extension of himself. Pride goes before a fall, as the saying goes, and in this case, Doug's pride in the job he's done "training" Annie to be a good fake human, and girlfriend is the cause of his ultimate downfall. Once fully out from underneath Doug's ownership, Annie acknowledges that Doug "loves her. In his own limited way. His own stunted, selfish way" (227). She plays it cool for the night, using sex as a tool to tire Doug out and lull him into a false sense of security before making her escape. Once outside, the anger hits as Annie realizes that Doug never taught her anything of real value or import, just what he deemed to be important.

Witnessing Annie come to terms with her newfound freedom and the realities of her relationship with Doug has a similar visceral quality as did the scene when he locked her away in the closet with her libido set to max levels. Annie is:

> Fuming, irrational. He relished controlling her … Whenever she tries to calm down, her anger flares again, alarming and raw … Loneliness she knows and despair, but not this animal that claws at her chest … You want to know danger? She thinks. Try living with a man who creates you just so he can eat your soul … Doug permeated the circuitry of her mind. He set the parameters and funneled every impulse into serving him. He made her rage impermissible. (229)

In paralleling this scene to the earlier episode, Greer makes clear her feelings regarding Doug and his treatment of Annie. His abusive behavior doesn't just extend to matters of her physical

body, but of her mind, too. The body and the mind are of equal importance. Knowing that other Stella-Handy robots are out there operating with copies of Annie's CIU, the novel ends optimistically with Annie heading back to Jacobson's home where she will wait, hopefully, for others like her to arrive.

Doug purchased Annie knowing she was a simulacrum. In fact, on the heels of a difficult divorce, that is precisely what drew him to her in the first place. He no longer wanted to be challenged by a real woman, someone with her own distinct personality, opinions, and motivations for being. Instead, he wanted a relationship that had the appearance of reality, but without all of that messy unpredictability and change. He wanted Annie to be just human enough, but in a way that he manipulated and controlled and that made him feel powerful. Eventually, the question shifts from "is Annie real" to "who gets to define Annie's realness." In the novel's closing pages, Greer reinforces a message she's been pushing towards all along, "She is not human. She is Annie, a Stella, her own star. No more and no less" (230). We are left, once again, debating whether its relevant to make a distinction between the real and the hyperreal. If realness is defined by its proximity to the human, then no, Annie is not real. But if we are open to exploring broader ideas of what it means to be real, as Greer encourages us to do, Annie is as real as you or I.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Perhaps, by now, you are feeling more conflicted than ever at the idea of romantic and meaningfully intimate relationships between humans and artificial intelligence. I will not refer to it as a problem, so instead, let's agree that this *conundrum* isn't going anywhere any time soon and that in fact, it will only continue to become more prevalent as technology advances and we, as a society, become more comfortable integrating technology into our lives at even greater rates and in different ways than we do now. Many of us already rely on algorithms to help us find love, so why not cut out the middleman and find love directly with the algorithm instead? While many journalists, theorists, scholars, and the like, may choose to view simulacral relationships with a skeptical eye and fear they'll lead to the decline of "real" relationships, I propose looking, instead, at these relationships as opportunities to broaden our idea of what love and companionship can be. As Jeanette Winterson proffers in *12 Bytes*, "we must "reimagine – completely – what we call 'real.' This reimagined 'real' will soon be what we call the world" (37). At the outset, I suggested we explore these types of relationships through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal and it is to the hyperreal I return to now.

On the surface, the question we are attempting to answer appears to be: are these relationships real? However, if it is true that, as Julie Carpenter argues, "the social robot does not merely inhabit the human world; it transforms it, forcing people to confront presuppositions about agency, autonomy, and the essence of the social bond itself" (1), then the question shifts and becomes the following: is the way the artificial being changes us and what it makes us feel,

and how it alters our perception of ourselves and the world around us, real. If the answer is yes, as I believe it is, what does that mean for the distinctions between the real and the hyperreal? Baudrillard wrote "the real … has disappeared from our life. Hallucination of the real, of lived experience, of the quotidian, but reconstituted, sometimes down to disquietingly strange details … brought to light with a transparent precision, but without substance, derealized in advance, hyperrealized" (124). While the technology required is still theoretical, the robot characters in *Machines Like Me*, *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*, and *Annie Bot* present an alternative idea, one where the hallucination of the real does indeed have substance to the point that they've moved beyond being simulacra and become something new entirely. If, as David Levy optimistically surmises in *Love and Sex with Robots*, relationships with sentient robots will be commonplace by 2050, these novels are excellent tools to begin preparing us for that future. Robots function, in many ways, similarly to novels. Both are mirrors, reflecting back to us who we are, what we fear, what gives us anxiety, and what we love and desire. They are both tools for developing empathy and understanding for the Other.

Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* is the most cautionary and fearful of our three novels. Charlie, the protagonist, embodies the human fear of obsolescence, and sees Adam, the robot, as a threat to his place in life. Adam's presence opens Charlie's eyes to his own shortcomings. Adam is a tool to be used, and his personhood is denied to the point that Charlie murders Adam rather than consider new opportunities presented by Adam's existence. In Adam, McEwan takes a clinical approach, presenting a much colder and off-putting robot than *The Mad Scientist's Daughter* and *Annie Bot* do. McEwan is uneasy about our posthumanist future, and his novel reflects those concerns about the diminishing divide between man and machine.

Cassandra Rose Clarke's *The Mad Scientist's Daughter* fulfills the promise of a meaningful relationship between a human and a robot. We witness Cat struggle to come to terms with her feelings for Finn in a world that is just beginning to grant personhood to sentient robots. At the same time, Finn challenges those around him to understand his sense of self and accept that he is a robot with no desire to pretend to be human. Finn is a fully formed being and he's both real and a robot. Those things can all be true at the same time. Carpenter asserts that "robots do not merely act; they participate in the creation of social reality … Each interaction with a robot becomes a stone in the mosaic of this new social reality" (1). Finn's impact on Cat's social reality is proof positive of his realness and the veracity of their relationship.

Sierra Greer's *Annie Bot* paints a picture that is most similar to our current reality regarding sex robots and engaging in questions about the ethics of sex robots and issues of consent and agency. Greer projects a future that takes seriously the concerns scholars have about the potentially harmful impact highly sexualized female robots could have on society and our expectations of women's roles and bodies. Greer's novel, strategically written in an omniscient third-person narrative style, centers Annie's perspective and often delivers key insight into her thoughts and feelings, making her the clear protagonist of the novel. This encourages the reader to empathize with Annie and see her as a person, rather than an object, in the story. Annie, much like Finn in *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*, has evolved past being a simulacrum and is something new. While Annie is more technologically advanced than any AI we are likely to encounter in our lifetime, it's still important that we begin to ask these big questions about agency and personhood because the answers will not come easily or overnight.

The work of posthumanist novels like *Machines Like Me*, *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*, and *Annie Bot* is vital as AI becomes ever more present, for better or worse, in our lives. When it

comes to matters of the heart, things are rarely straightforward, and the addition of AI is only going to further complicate things. The “reimagined real,” as Winterson calls it, is closer than we think, and we need to be prepared for it if we are going to keep our humanity intact in the face of an increasingly digital tomorrow.

CHAPTER 6

Looking Ahead

All three novels—*Machines Like Me*, *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*, and *Annie Bot*—engage in conversations about the literary and the role of literature in our lives. In *Machines Like Me*, McEwan chooses to have Adam read a number of works and genres, including "Schrödinger's Dublin lectures, *What is Life?*, from which he concluded that he was alive," (155), haikus, which Adam declares "the literary form of the future" (159), and the poetry of Philip Larkin. As Adam dies, he tells Charlie and Miranda:

> My entire being is stored elsewhere … hope you'll listen … to one last seventeen-syllable poem. It owes a debt to Philip Larkin. But it's not about trees and leaves. It's about machines like me and people like you and our future together … the sadness that's to come … With improvements over time … we'll surpass you … and outlast you … even as we love you. Believe me, these lines express no triumph … Only regret. (303)

Throughout the novel, Adam has been a proponent of what we know as the posthuman, or the transhuman, and indeed, his "entire being" being uploaded and still available after death supports this, as do the final lines of his poem, "our leaves are falling / Come spring, we will renew / But you, alas, fall once" (304). Adam and other robots like him will be around forever, constantly reborn to live again and again, whereas humans like Charlie and Miranda only live once. But Charlie and Miranda aren't actually humans; they are characters in a novel and in that sense, they, too, will live forever.

Up to now, we have approached the robots in these novels as the sole simulacral figures in each of their stories. They are the hyperreal and the other human characters are the real. But, in expanding this thesis and looking to the future, there are ways to read our treatment of all literary characters as forms of simulacra. In *Annie Bot*, as part of Annie's journey toward self-actualization, she discovers novels and the joys of reading, calling books "her escape" and noting how "she cogitates on the characters during the day … questioning their motives, wondering what they'll do next. She absorbs the language, turning phrases in her mind, delving into the patterns of how things are said and what is left out" (153). Later, Annie shares that she "gravitates towards novels by women … She appreciates how the novels transport her, they make her feel connected to human women, especially outsiders. She wonders what it would be like to find a book about a robot like herself" (192). Annie wonders about the interiority of the characters in novels, what makes them tick, and what motivates them, much in the same way the human characters in the novels explored here are curious about the robots in their lives. She connects to and empathizes with the characters. In doing so, Annie taps into her own humanity and better understands herself.

In *The Mad Scientist's Daughter,* Finn, as Cat's tutor, is responsible for her earliest exposure to literature. Cat recalls that "he recited to her the *Odyssey* and *Metamorphoses* … 'Of bodies changed to various forms, I sing.' She'd never encountered any stories as intricate or compelling as the stories he gave her … She liked best the stories about people becoming other things" (13 – 14). The cited line, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, thematically connects, just like *Annie Bot*, to Pygmalion and Galatea, whose story is also told in the poem. Perhaps it is her early exposure to these stories, "of people becoming other things," that helps to open Cat's mind to the

possibility of life in a posthumanist world where humans are not strictly humans and machines, like Finn, are not necessarily just machines, but capable of doing and being more.

Megan Ward explores the interconnectedness between AI and character in *Seeming Human: Artificial Intelligence and Victorian Realist Character*, positing that:

> Artificial beings both replicate human subjectivity and create it anew, representing and embodying a complex set of interwoven experiences that define what it means to seem—rather than be—human … By exploring the ways that the artifice of machine life can illuminate the artifice of realist character, this project emphasizes the createdness of fictional character. (3 – 4)

Connecting the novel and AI further, Ward suggests that AI has "the goal of verisimilitude," what she calls "the same slippery standard of the realist novel" (9). Ward is correct in that all characters in realist novels, which I believe is a term reasonably applied to all three novels explored in this thesis, despite their science fiction elements, are meant to seem human, and not be human. This complicates my readings of the novels in ways that are intriguing to explore, especially if we consider all novels to be their own form of simulacra. Ward asserts that "reading AI as a theory of character forces us to stop looking for a version of ourselves, for resemblance or relatability, and begin engaging with the ways that characters have always been posthuman" (11). How do we interpret this alongside Baudrillard's definition of the hyperreal, a "hallucination of the real, of lived experience, of the quotidian, but reconstituted, sometimes down to disquietingly strange details" (124)? No one reads a novel and argues over whether it's real or not, but we accept and even celebrate its ability to fundamentally change us as humans. Novels help us develop empathy, see ourselves in others, and envision futures that do not currently, but one day might, exist. Novels, and the characters within them, are ultimately

nothing but imitations of real life, but that does not diminish their ability to be the catalyst for real feelings. The same could be said of AI, and especially of the humanoid robots in *Machines Like Me*, *The Mad Scientist's Daughter*, and *Annie Bot*.

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