

Literary automata

Professor: Jocelyn Holland

Fall 21 / T + Th, 10:30 – 12:00

Office hour Tuesday 2 – 3 p.m.

(or any time during the week by appointment)

note: there might be small changes to this syllabus before the beginning of the quarter, but no increases in the workload



Course overview:

This is a new course! Its goal is to examine relations between humans and automata from different perspectives. We will start by looking at early visions of the automaton in literature and mythology as well as how early technological innovations tried to make those visions a reality. We then move into more modern literary experiments, where the distinction between the human and the automaton becomes more difficult to define. One of the objectives of this course is for you to develop your own thoughts about some of the big questions surrounding automata, particularly those that exhibit extremely lifelike human behavior: what is it that makes them similar to or different from us, and to what degree do we feel compelled to treat them as 'humanlike' if not precisely human? Why are automata so often imagined as servants?

In the second half of the quarter we are going to shift our attention from "automata" in general to robots in particular by immersing ourselves in a literary world that describes a technological future where humans and machines interact in surprising ways: Daniel H. Wilson's *Robopocalypse*. This is a really fun novel which, as you can guess from the title, describes a future dystopia (or utopia, if you are a robot) where an artificial intelligence has become powerful enough to stage a machine rebellion against humankind.

Robopocalypse will allow us to go much more in depth with a number of questions already raised in the earlier readings such as:

- at what point of technological development, if any, are we obligated to treat robots ethically?
- what does it mean to be "transhuman" and how does this term force us to reconsider what it means to be human?
- does technological progress pose a threat to human existence? (in other words: how plausible is the idea of a robot apocalypse?)
- how does the current state of robotics and AI research today compare with the fictional vision of the novel?

With the exception of *Robopocalypse*, which you should order directly online, all of the readings will be available as pdfs on the Canvas site, where you will also find reading guides and useful other documents to help you with the assignments.

Part 1: Historical Overview of Automata in Myth, Literature, and Philosophy

Sept. 28 Introduction

Origins of the automaton:

Sept. 30 Automata in Greek myths (note: class will meet today from 10:30 – 11:30)

Oct. 5 Homer's automata: *Iliad* Book 18 (excerpt); *Odyssey* book 8 (excerpt)
+ Hero of Alexandria's mechanical visions

Oct. 7 Talking heads (handout with excerpts from Medieval and Renaissance texts)

Oct. 12 "The Idea of the Golem" by Gershom Scholem

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Magic, Alchemy, and Mechanics:

Oct. 14 La Mettrie, *Man Machine*; and Descartes on animals and humans as machines

Oct. 19 E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Sandman*

Oct. 21 Hoffmann, *The Sandman*

Oct. 26 Prosper Merrimée, "Venus of Ille"

Oct. 28 Edgar Allen Poe, "Maelzel's chess player"

First homework assignment due
on Friday, October 15th

Part 2: The World of Daniel H. Wilson's *Robopocalypse*

Nov. 2 Daniel H. Wilson, *Robopocalypse*: part 1

Nov. 4 Daniel H. Wilson, *Robopocalypse*: part 1

Nov. 9 Daniel H. Wilson, *Robopocalypse*: part 2

Nov. 11 *Robopocalypse*: part 2

Nov. 16 *Robopocalypse*: part 3

Nov. 18 *Robopocalypse*: part 3

Nov. 23 *Robopocalypse*: part 4

Nov. 25 Thanksgiving holiday

Nov. 30 *Robopocalypse* (part 5)

Dec. 2 Wrap-up + prep for the final paper

Second homework assignment
due on Friday, November 12th

Outline or abstract of your final
paper due December 2nd (in class).

Final paper due on Thursday,
December 9th.

Course requirements:

- In-class attendance: 15%
- Perusall comments: 15%
- Homework assignment x 2 = 40%
- Final paper = 30%

Perusall is an app installed on
Canvas which allows you to add
comments and questions directly
to the readings. It's easy to use
and very helpful as a springboard
for classroom discussions.

About the discussions and the writing assignments:

The attendance/participation component of the grade is weighted at 15% because literature courses rely heavily on contributions to the discussion: the more perspectives, the better. Classroom attendance is expected unless you are in quarantine, in which case I will do my best to help you keep up with the readings and discussion topics.

I am always available through email or individual Zoom sessions if there is anything you would like to discuss. I can also pre-read drafts of your papers (given enough time before the due date) to provide preliminary feedback before a grade is assigned.

For additional help with your essays: The Hixon Writing Center (<http://www.writing.caltech.edu>)
In my experience, students who use this resource even once during a quarter receive substantially better grades on their written work.

For help with feelings of stress: Student Wellness Services (<http://wellness.caltech.edu/>) is the place to go. They can help with all sorts of problems, from feelings of stress and isolation to basic workload issues. They understand the needs of Caltech students and have a lot of experience handling all sorts of problems, small and large.

A word about plagiarism: Plagiarism is when you take the ideas, thought process, or words (spoken or written) of another individual and use them as your own. Because we will not be writing the kind of research papers in this course that rely on many sources, the ideas you present in writing should be entirely your own. Any cases of plagiarism will be referred directly to the Dean of Undergraduates. I will work with you to show you how to quote from primary texts correctly, and the Hixon writing center is also there to help make sure you get this right. Accidental plagiarism is still plagiarism, so it is really important to know the rules ahead of time!