

## The Evolution of Human Empathy Toward the “Automaton” in Karel Čapek’s R.U.R. and E.T.A. Hoffmann’s The Sandman Mohammed Habeeb Ahmed

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تطور التعاطف الإنساني تجاه «الإنسان الآلي»، في مسرحية روسوم يونيفرسال روبوتس (R.U.R.)  
لكارل تشابك، وقصة رجل الرمل لإي. ت. أ. هوفمان.

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المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث تحليل تطور التعاطف الإنساني تجاه الكائنات الاصطناعية من خلال دراسة أدبية مقارنة لقصة (The Sandman (1816) لـ E.T.A. Hoffmann، ومسرحية R.U.R. (روسوم يونيفرسال روبوتس، 1920) لـ Karel Čapek. ومن خلال دراسة العلاقة النفسية بين الشخصيات البشرية والحياة الاصطناعية في هذين العملين الأدبيين، أجادل بأن تمثيل الإنسان الآلي قد شهد تطوراً ملحوظاً من أوائل القرن التاسع عشر إلى أوائل القرن العشرين. ففي قصة رجل الرمل، تُصوّر أولمبيا بوصفها آلة مخيفة وغريبة صُممت أساساً لخداع المتفرجين وتضليلهم، وإثارة فضولهم ثم إحباطهم لاحقاً بسبب طبيعتها الوهمية. ولا يُعد انجذاب ناتانيل إلى أولمبيا مثلاً على التعاطف، بل تعبيراً عن رغباته النرجسية، مما يتيح القول إن الكائنات الاصطناعية في الأدب الرومانسي تُقدّم بوصفها تقليداً مقلّماً يهدد السلامة النفسية للإنسان. أما في مسرحية R.U.R. فتُصوّر الروبوتات في البداية على أنها مجرد آلات خلقت لخدمة البشر، غير أن تطورها اللاحق يمكّن تشابك من تحويلها إلى كائنات واعية تعاني، وتمتلك مبادئ أخلاقية وتكاملاً عاطفياً. وباستخدام مفهوم التعاطف، ومفهوم الغرابة الفرويدية، ونظريات ما بعد الإنسانية المتعلقة بتفاعلات الإنسان والآلة، يناقش هذا البحث دلالات كل من القصتين في تطور التصورات المتغيرة حول الحياة، والوعي، والآلات الشبيهة بالبشر. ويبين البحث أن قصة هوفمان تمثل مفهوم الغرابة، حيث يصبح الإنسان الآلي تجسيداً لاضطراب الثنائية بين الحياة والآلة، في حين تستشرف مسرحية تشابك قضايا معاصرة مرتبطة بالوعي الاصطناعي في فلسفة الحياة الاصطناعية. وأخيراً، يخلص البحث إلى أن التطور من رجل الرمل إلى R.U.R. يعكس تحولاً أوسع في الأدب، يتمثل في الانتقال من النظر إلى الآلات الشبيهة بالحياة بوصفها مجرد أوام، إلى اعتبارها كائنات تستحق التعاطف والاعتبار الأخلاقي. الكلمات المفتاحية: التعاطف، الكائنات الاصطناعية، الروبوتات، الإنسان الآلي، الغرابة، هوفمان، تشابك، رجل الرمل، R.U.R.، علاقات الإنسان والآلة.

### Abstract

This research will analyze the development of human empathy towards artificial creatures using comparative literary analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” (1816) and Karel Čapek’s “R.U.R.” (Rossum’s Universal Robots, 1920). Studying the psychological relationship between the human characters and artificial life in these two literary works, I shall argue that the representation of automatons evolves considerably from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. First, in “The Sandman,” Olympia is shown mainly as a creepy and uncanny machine designed to deceive and mislead her spectators and thereby provoke their curiosity and eventually their disillusionment due to her illusory nature. Nathanael’s attraction to Olympia is not an example of empathy but the expression of his narcissistic desires, which makes it possible to state that artificial creatures in Romantic literature are presented as a creepy imitation that jeopardizes humans’

psychological integrity. On the other hand, in "R.U.R.," robots are initially portrayed as mere machines created to serve humans; however, further development of robots allows Čapek to turn them into suffering and self-conscious beings with moral principles and emotional integrity. Using the concept of empathy, the Freudian concept of the uncanny, and post-humanist theories regarding human-machine interactions, this study discusses the implications of each story in the development of shifting perceptions about life, consciousness, and human-like machines. It is shown in this study that whereas Hoffmann's story is seen to represent the uncanny in which the automatons become an embodiment of a disturbance in the dichotomy of life versus machine, the work by Čapek foresees contemporary issues associated with artificial consciousness in the philosophy of artificial life. Finally, it is concluded that the evolution from *The Sandman* to *R.U.R.* is indicative of a broader development within literature of shifting perceptions from viewing life-like machines as illusions to seeing such beings as worthy of empathy and moral consideration. **Keywords:** Empathy, Artificial Beings, Robots, Automaton, The Uncanny, Hoffmann, Čapek, The Sandman, R.U.R., Human Machine Relations

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

The representation of artificial beings within the realm of literature has had an essential function in shaping literary and philosophical discussions since the dawn of time. They have been perceived as literary devices through which authors investigate the limits of humanity and creation, alongside the constantly shifting boundary between humans and non-humans. Despite the fact that the concept of artificial life is usually associated with the evolution of technology during the modern period, the fabrication of artificial life has a rich tradition in myth and folklore, predating the modern age. From ancient myths, like that of Talos, Pygmalion, Golem, and Homunculus, one may discern traces of humanity's age-old aspiration for artificial life. The myths hint at several basic concerns with regard to creation, control, and imitation (Brand 4-5). Nevertheless, artificial beings in literary modernism symbolize a far wider range of anxieties about mechanization and human nature. In this regard, the literary automaton served as a central metaphor in examining the changing relation between humans and technology as well as the relationship between technology and consciousness. The portrayal of artificial beings throughout time adapted to the development of philosophical and scientific thought, from the traditional theological notion of divine creation to the more secular notion of mechanization in life. During the era of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, advances in technology and innovations in science inspired a fascination with the ability of creating life artificially. This fascination directly conflicted with previous religious beliefs about the creation of man by divine powers and unique human creation (Peterson 12). Thus, the literary portrayal of automatons and artificial beings began to reflect society's concern over being reduced to machines and the possibility of future artificially created creatures having their own consciousness and emotions. An early example of literary automatons is E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* (1816). Olympia serves as an artificial being because she embodies animate and inanimate features in one person due to her similarity to a human woman and impeccable construction. But still, the cause of Nathanael's affection towards Olympia is not a mutual love; it is caused by projection, illusion, and self-reflection. One can explain the nature of Nathanael's love considering that people are prone to loving artificial objects because of their ability to reflect people's subjectively created illusions and dreams. Thus, Olympia becomes an object that exemplifies Freud's concept of the uncanny – "the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the imaginary" (Freud 124). Therefore, Olympia turns into a menacing object due to her similarity with the real human being. There exists an emotional connection between humans and automatons in the play *The Sandman*; the issue is related to the general question concerning artificial reproduction, mechanization of human life posed by Romanticism. But it is not only because Olympia consists of artificial parts; the problem is also connected with her similarity with humans. As some researchers in robotics state, people have a tendency to feel sympathy towards something reminding them of themselves both physically and emotionally; however, when the object gets too similar to them, it often becomes disgusting (Misselhorn 103; Zlotowski qtd. in Brand 6). In such a manner, Hoffman succeeds in creating a character that is a creature enough to attract because it is humanoid but at the same time artificial enough to frighten people after the unveiling of its true identity. Unlike Hoffman's use of the Gothic tradition of eerie mimicry to describe the artificial creature in his work, Čapek (*Rossum's Universal Robots*), published in 1920, represents an important step forward in the literary portrayal of artificial creations since it uses industrialization and political developments of those days to depict artificial creatures. If Olympia can be regarded as the creation of illusion and attractiveness, robots in *R.U.R.* stand for a new class of artificial creatures created to carry out different functions and produce goods in a mechanized industry (Huxley 5). In other words,

according to the author, robots are mechanical products of living creatures. They do not have souls or emotions as the authors perceive it, and there are distinct hierarchies among masters and servants. At the same time, with time, conditions for robots to achieve self-respect were created. In essence, the entire process presents a challenge to the perception that only man is the only being that can be considered to be emotional and ethical individuals. This is due to the fact that as technology advances and the robots become more human-like, the notion of sympathy begins to transform from the initial form of sympathizing with humans into sympathizing with artificial entities. In the play, the robot becomes more than an entity of fear; it becomes an entity that has moral value. The differences between Hoffmann's *The Sandman* and Čapek's *R.U.R.*, respectively, indicate the changes in attitudes towards artificial life in literary works. This is because while previous literatures regarded automata as frightening artificial life threatening the existence of humans, literary works in the early twenty-first century view artificial beings as oppressed subjects. It is clear from this transition that there exist new definitions of what constitutes being a person and identity. According to this definition, humanity is no longer defined only biologically or religiously. According to Brand, the hatred for machines stems from humanity's strict demarcation line drawn between "us" and "the Other," with humanity believing the differences between humans and others justify the absence of empathy (3). Yet, dyspathy may cease if humanity learns that there exists no distinction between the human and the artificial, leading to the replacement of fear with empathy and exclusion with ethicality (Brand 3). In this paper, the transformation process of literature and philosophy from being fearful of automatons to sympathizing with them through the comparative analysis of Hoffmann's *The Sandman* and Čapek's *R.U.R.* is considered. By analyzing the way in which both literary texts develop feelings of humans toward artificial creatures, one can better understand the evolution of notions such as empathy and subjectivity and also the new perception of human nature associated with technological advancements and philosophies. Specifically, this study will examine the factors upon which literary works base their judgment of who deserves empathy, with a special focus on the way in which they evolve. From a methodological point of view, the paper will employ a comparative literary approach enriched by theories associated with psychoanalysis and posthumanism. As for Freud's theory of the uncanny, it helps to understand the emotions generated by Olympia in *The Sandman* better in terms of the fear of the possibility of artificial human creation and the blurring of certain ontological borders. Similarly, posthumanist theory can be applied to interpret *R.U.R.* in order to understand the challenges posed by artificial consciousness and to analyze anthropocentric presuppositions regarding the concept of personhood. Consequently, this work argues that the evolution of Hoffmann's uncanny automaton into Čapek's sentient robot corresponds to a broader trend in Western culture that moves away from considering artificial creatures as mere trickeries of machine-made imitations towards viewing them as potential beings capable of self-consciousness, depth of feeling, and moral agency. In effect, the works examined here foreshadow modern concerns regarding artificial intelligence, consciousness, and morality when it comes to interacting with man-made beings.

## 1.2 Research Problem and Objectives

The depiction of artificial creations in literature is an area that has drawn much academic attention over time owing to its relation to issues such as identity, consciousness, ethics, and modern technology. Many studies have explored the topic of artificial life in literature by considering it from the points of view of technology, philosophy, and posthumanism. However, comparatively few academic analyses of literary works have focused on the evolution of human emotional reactions towards artificial beings from a literary comparison throughout history. Most existing scholarship tends to focus on analyzing specific texts, such as Hoffmann's *The Sandman* or Čapek's *R.U.R.*, in their own right and considers either the sense of the uncanny in the mechanical creation, the industrial aspect of robotics, or the philosophical aspects of artificial consciousness. In comparison, there is insufficient comparative work examining how emotions towards artificial beings have evolved over different literary epochs and movements. This represents a major problem since human emotional reaction plays one of the major roles in determining the boundary between man and not man within literature. How the characters respond to artificial life forms may speak to larger cultural attitudes towards concepts of personhood, autonomy, and ethical value. Artificial life forms in Gothic and Romantic literature written around the beginning of the nineteenth century tend to be presented as uncanny creatures who mimic life and incite feelings of terror, estrangement, and madness. On the other hand, artificial beings in twentieth-century science fiction narratives have been consistently depicted as marginalized or misrepresented life forms that can arouse feelings of compassion and ethical responsibility. This indicates that there is a significant change in the literary and cultural attitude towards artificial life forms that requires more academic investigation. In line with the above discussion,

it can be argued that the primary question explored in this research concerns the ways and reasons behind the transformation in literary descriptions of human empathy towards artificial beings from Romanticism to modernity and its implications for the evolving definition of humanity. To this end, this research explores the intellectual, emotional, and ethical changes that influence the depiction of artificial beings as either frightening objects or compassionate subjects in E.T.A. Hoffmann's novella *The Sandman* and Karel Čapek's science fiction play *R.U.R.*

In order to solve this research problem, the following research objectives should be accomplished:

- 1.To consider the depiction of artificial beings in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* and Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* in the context of the literary epoch they belong to.
- 2.To investigate human emotions towards artificial beings in both literary works, especially regarding the issues of fear, alienation, empathy, and moral recognition.
- 3.To discover how both authors represent different notions of humanness and non-humanness through their depictions of artificial beings.
- 4.To explore how the concept of automaton is developed from an eerie object that imitates humans to a morally complex character which can inspire sympathy.
- 5.To consider what such a development means about the wider socio-cultural and philosophical transformation in the perception of technology, consciousness, and personhood.

With these goals in mind, the study will make a significant contribution to the field of literary studies since it will provide a comparative analysis of empathy towards artificial beings as a historically changing phenomenon of literature.

### 1.3 Methodology and Theoretical Approach

For this study, the methodology used is qualitative comparative literary analysis that aims to analyze the changing portrayal of human empathy towards artificial creatures in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* and Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.*. Considering that the study focuses mainly on literary meanings, emotions, and ideology changes, qualitative textual analysis will be the best fit for examining the relationship created by the texts between human beings and other living things. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study will explore the characterization, symbols, themes, and emotions found within the texts to determine the differences and similarities in the portrayal of artificial creatures. The comparative method is ideal for this study since it can help to compare the two texts written during different literary eras-Romanticism and early science fiction literature. The pairing of Hoffmann's novel *The Sandman* and Čapek's *R.U.R.* allows tracing the development of literary attitudes towards artificial creatures from Romantic preoccupations with the concept of the uncanny and irrational to modern themes such as mechanization, industrialization, and synthetic consciousness. From a theoretical perspective, the research is based on two key approaches: psychoanalysis and posthumanism. Psychoanalytical theory, in its turn, is based specifically on Freudian ideas about the uncanny experience. In his work on the uncanny experience, Freud emphasizes that the essence of the uncanny feeling lies in the peculiar sensation caused by something being at once strange and familiar and in the blurring of the line between what can be considered living and what can be considered dead (Freud 124). It can be stated that this phenomenon is crucial to the interpretation of the figure of Olympia, who is an embodiment of psychoanalytic fears of artificiality and imitation. In addition to psychoanalytic theory, the present study employs posthumanist theory to interpret Čapek's work, *R.U.R.*, and its depiction of artificial consciousness. The tenets of posthumanist thought complicate traditional humanist conceptions of humanity that regard human beings as absolutely separate from other entities in the world, questioning the binary oppositions of human versus machine, Self versus Other, nature versus artifice. These principles can be helpful for understanding how the characters in *R.U.R.* become beings with consciousness, feeling, and morality in addition to mechanical bodies rather than simply machines as they were introduced in the play. Thus, the study examines the implications for the definitions of personhood according to the posthumanist conception of the human and artificial being's possession of characteristics traditionally attributed to humans. In addition, the study considers empathy and alterity as a means to discuss how the relationship with artificial creatures becomes emotional in each literary work under investigation. Specifically, based on the definition of empathy as "imaginative identification with an object, person, or state" (Misselhorn 105), the study examines the criteria of extending empathic responses to artificial beings. Moreover, the notion of "Othering" will help to comprehend how artificial creatures are perceived as entirely separate from humans and denied moral status until they become indistinguishable from humanity itself (Brand 3) Through the use of psychoanalysis, posthumanism, and empathy, it will be possible to

create a complex analytical framework that can be utilized to explore the psychological and philosophical aspects of artificial life presented in literature. Such an interdisciplinary methodology makes it possible to conduct a comprehensive comparative research into how literature deals with the issue of artificial beings from multiple viewpoints. Therefore, using such an analysis method, it will be possible to examine the process through which Hoffmann and Čapek depict the connection between humanity and artificial beings and the evolution of literary empathy for artificial life forms.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Empathy, the Uncanny, and the Artificial Human

The portrayal of artificial creatures in literature has been used as a tool for examining humanness, consciousness, and emotional subjectivity. Since automatons represent an intermediary between the object and the organism, the machine and the human, they complicate the difference between what is living and non-living, natural or artificial, and the self and other. In order to analyze the portrayal of empathy towards artificial creatures in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* and Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.*, three overlapping theoretical approaches are considered in this research: empathy theory, Sigmund Freud's uncanny, and posthumanist criticisms of anthropocentric humanism. Empathy represents one of the key approaches that enable empathizing with and recognizing another creature on emotional and ethical grounds. Empathy can be defined as a process of understanding, sharing, or identifying with another's emotional experience. As an approach, empathy has been studied extensively in the field of literary theory, where it includes not only humans but fictional and non-human characters as well. According to Suzanne Keen, literary empathy represents an act of "feeling with" fictional characters. This is particularly applicable to artificial beings in literature, whose emotional appeal exists despite the ambiguity surrounding their ontological existence. Empathy towards artificial beings is unstable due to their ontological ambiguity as beings neither wholly subjective nor objective in nature. As stated by Misselhorn, humans have a tendency to empathize with artificial creatures due to the anthropomorphic characteristics they attribute to them, which bestow human emotions on entities devoid of human qualities (105). As such, empathy for artificial beings reflects more human psychological wishes than the beings themselves. An example of this can be seen in Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, where Nathanael develops an emotional bond with Olympia, who is not a human being. His interest is not motivated by exchange but by projection as he projects his ideals of femininity and receptiveness onto an artificial entity that cannot reciprocate his affections. His interest shows how empathy does not necessarily result from recognition of another's consciousness but is rather narcissistic in nature. While artificial beings may attract empathy through similarity and projection, they also instill fear as their imitative capabilities pose threats to ontological barriers. In this regard, Freud's uncanny can be used to explain such a phenomenon of being uneasy with the presence of an artificial object that resembles living creatures. According to Freud, the uncanny (das Unheimliche) can be described as the feeling of eeriness that occurs when people experience something that seems familiar, yet strange at the same time (Freud 124). The author describes automatons and artificial human beings as being very uncanny because they make it difficult to differentiate between animate and inanimate things. The Freudian approach can be applied to describing Olympia as a character that makes one uneasy due to being very beautiful. Indeed, Olympia's realistic appearance can cause one to admire the doll, whereas the knowledge about Olympia's artificial nature makes one feel horrified. Thus, the character is able to create confusion about what should be considered real because of the lack of distinctive criteria for making the required differentiation. Moreover, there are more general concerns related to the notion of the machine-like person as something that seems very similar to the actual human being. While Freud's theory provides sufficient justification for the horrific treatment of artificial beings presented in Romantic fiction, it fails to explain later literary works in which artificial beings receive sympathetic treatment. That is why the present research includes elements of posthumanist theory as well. In posthumanism, the traditional humanistic approach is criticized, and the oppositions of human vs. non-human, natural vs. artificial, and body vs. mind are rejected. According to Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, modern technologies blur the boundaries between man and machine to a large degree. In her famous article, Haraway claims that identity in the future will become more technologically hybridized than ever before, rejecting the existence of pure humanity altogether (149). Similarly, Hayles argues that the posthuman identity occurs when consciousness is separated from biological bodies (2-3). From this perspective, artificial beings do not represent mere imitation and failure; instead, they represent an alternative form of identity, subjectivity, or self. This aspect can be seen clearly in Čapek's *R.U.R.*, in which robots gain emotionality, intellect, and consciousness. Opposite to Olympia, Čapek's robots do not possess any human-like traits, which leaves room for discussion about how to define humanity. In the case of *R.U.R.*, the representation

of robots in terms of their capacity to suffer, desire, rebel, and love works against the assumption that artificiality makes one unsuitable for having a subjective existence or an inherent value. Empathy is no longer directed at human characters who mistreat robots; rather, it is directed at artificial creatures that possess consciousness and experience pain. Collectively, empathy theory, Freudian uncanniness, and posthumanism can be considered as a set of conceptual tools used to analyze the literary development of artificial entities from uncanny deceivers to ethically viable subjects. The explanation of why artificial beings may evoke empathy in readers and writers comes from empathy theory, whereas the idea of anxiety created by artificial imitations of humans comes from psychoanalysis.

### 2.1 Defining Empathy and Emotional Projection

The phenomenon of empathy is defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and respond emotionally to what someone else is experiencing. The concept includes two types of empathy: cognitive empathy that implies comprehension of the other person's emotions and affective empathy, which involves an emotional reaction to what someone else feels (Misselhorn 105). In literature, empathy may extend to fictitious or even non-human subjects. Nevertheless, the problem of empathy in regard to artificial beings creates specific challenges because they represent neither an object nor a subject due to the lack of consciousness. The artificial beings require identification of human attributes for empathy to occur in most cases, and it is linked to the concept of anthropomorphism that involves endowing animals or artifacts with human characteristics and attributes (Brand 6). In other words, empathy toward artificial beings is achieved due to projection of one's own emotional world to the artificial beings. This is seen in *The Sandman* when Nathanael's love for Olympia is one of projection and not of connection at all. He considers her to be an ideal since she is passive and thus enables Nathanael to project his ideal qualities into her. Finally, the empathy shown towards artificial beings is a demonstration of how the emotional recognition of others is influenced by perception, projection, and social values about who qualifies for empathic recognition.

### 2.2 Freud's Uncanny in Literature and Fear of Artificial Beings

The theory of uncanny proposed by Freud still provides the basis for analyzing the fears associated with artificial beings found in literary works. As defined by Freud, uncanny is a state of emotional disorientation that results from a sense of familiarity mingled with strangeness (Freud 124). What makes artificial beings uncanny is the fact that they copy human forms and actions despite being completely inhuman. Freud explicitly states that "dolls and automatons" can be classified as uncanny since they create confusion regarding what is alive and what is not (135). In Olympia, the initially admired qualities turn into horrifying features, and she becomes an image of an uncanny figure. In the first place, her beauty and liveliness make her seem very human. However, her true artificiality shakes people's belief about what looks like a human. According to Freud's concept, the scary aspect of an uncanny automaton is associated with the idea of human being turned into a machine, since if artificial creations can imitate human actions and behaviors, humans are nothing more than machines too. As a result, one may say that an uncanny image shows that the real cause behind the fear of artificial beings is not only related to technological advances, but rather concerns issues of consciousness and mortality.

### 2.3 Posthuman Perspectives on Human-Machine Relations

Although psychoanalysis sheds light on the fear associated with earlier artificial beings, posthumanism provides an adequate explanation of sympathy towards them later on. According to posthumanism, humanistic notions of humans being inherently rational, independent and superior to other species are questioned. Posthumanism rejects the human/non-human and nature/artifice dichotomy. Hayles' theory of the cyborg refutes the concept of pure humanity as technological development has already made people hybrid by nature (149). Hayles believes that human consciousness can be detached from its biological foundation (2-3). It means that artificial organisms should be regarded as alternatives to humanity. This theoretical context proves vital in order to examine the plot of *R.U.R.* Robots start out as technical devices intended to do manual work. However, having evolved intellectually and emotionally, they become subjects whose use poses an ethical problem. As they experience pain and have feelings, the idea of depriving them of their rights due to the absence of biological origins seems unreasonable. Thus, posthumanism reveals that the relationships between humans and machines in literature are philosophical reflections on personhood, ethical inclusion, and the instability of human identity itself.

### 3. Deceptive Empathy in Hoffmann's *The Sandman*

E.T.A. Hoffmann's story *The Sandman* is arguably one of the early and influential literary examples of the automaton as a psychologically engaging phenomenon. Written at the height of the Romantic period, Hoffmann's novella was shaped by contemporary fears about artificial life, perception, and human reason.

However, unlike stories of reciprocated emotions on behalf of the automaton, Hoffmann creates a tale where empathy towards the artificial creature proves to be illusory and deceitful in nature. *The Sandman* portrays a possible emotional engagement with artificial beings not based on subjectivity but as a result of human desire, narcissism, and imagination. Thus, in *The Sandman*, the empathy of the automaton is portrayed not as a moral bond but as an unhealthy psychological illusion.

### 3.1 Olympia: the Romantic Automaton

Olympia is the typical example of a Romantic automaton, who fascinates as well as scares in the literary vision of the nineteenth century. In the Romantic era, automatons were viewed with mixed emotions – as marvels of technology on one side and as frightening imitations of human nature on the other. According to Wilson, automatons usually served as the projections of human desires and fears associated with the attempt to exceed human flaws and, at the same time, replace humans spiritually and existentially (Wilson, 2006). In the story *The Sandman*, Olympia is presented as a perfect and elegant young lady whose appearance attracts all those around her. At the same time, the perfection of Olympia is associated with a certain artificiality. The girl rarely speaks, moves awkwardly, and performs certain stereotyped and mechanical actions. Thus, it can be concluded that the beauty of Olympia is artificial rather than organic. As such, Olympia is described as an imitation of an idealized beauty rather than real perfection. In turn, it allows Hoffman to show how artificiality hides emptiness behind the perfection. The image of Olympia also refers to the literary tradition of creating artificial women satisfying masculine desire. The story of Olympia resembles the ancient Greek legend about Pygmalion and his statue of Galatea. Just like in the story about Galatea, the image of Olympia shows how an ideal feminine beauty is created exclusively by men. Contrary to the legend where the creation of Galatea becomes live, Olympia remains artificial only. Olympia, moreover, is concerned with romantic ideas about mechanization and its potential for dehumanization in regard to technological development. As she challenges the difference between the living and the dead, the distinction between life and its imitation, she makes both readers and characters question the visible signs that separate humanity from mere imitation of it. Thus, she is a character, as well as a symbolic challenge to the very notion of humanity.

### 3.2 Nathanael's Projection and Illusion

The protagonist's passion for Olympia cannot be regarded as a result of empathic relationship between two characters, since Nathanael projects his fantasy life on the automaton. It shows that in *The Sandman* empathy towards the automaton cannot be genuine because Nathanael views Olympia only as a projection of his own desires and needs rather than as an independent creature. This idea is consistent with the idea of anthropomorphism – assigning of human-like traits to animals and other beings. According to Misselhorn, people empathize with artificial creatures based more on anthropomorphizing them into personalities than on their actual level of awareness (Misselhorn, 2014). Nathanael needs only Olympia's anthropomorphic appearance and minor reactions to perceive emotions within her, despite the fact that she does not actually have any. Notably, Nathanael loves Olympia exactly because of her passiveness and silence. Whereas Clara fights with him, questioning his reasoning abilities and insisting on her intellectual freedom, Olympia remains silent and always agrees with what he says. Lack of subjectivity in Olympia allows him to reflect upon his true self through her. Instead of talking about various issues, Nathanael talks with himself by means of Olympia's mouth. Therefore, Nathanael's love is not related to any kind of personality in Olympia, but to his own desires. In this case, Wilson's idea that an artificial being could serve as a "psychic projection" appears highly appropriate and valuable. An automaton becomes a reflection of its inventor's unspoken desires and fantasies, which Nathanael proves through his love towards Olympia (Wilson, 2006). Therefore, the author criticizes not only the artificial life but also the human inclination to confuse imagination with true feelings. Thus, Nathanael's "empathy" becomes a delusion based on deception.

### 3.3 The Fall of Empathy through the Uncanny Unveiling

The unveiling of Olympia's true identity shatters the illusion of empathy and turns admiration into fear, showing that empathy crumbles when faced with the uncanny. The uncanny idea described by Freud becomes the best tool to analyze this process. The term "uncanny," according to Freud, means that feeling of awe caused by something strange and familiar, especially when an object is endowed with human features too realistically (Freud, 1919). Olympia is a perfect example of such an uncanny creation. On the one hand, her life-like appearance makes her appealing and convincing; on the other hand, there is something wrong about her conduct causing a sense of discomfort. When her secret comes to light, her humanity becomes false, and Nathanael's fondness turns into psychological torture at once. The act of revelation is traumatic in that it brings to light the

deceit inherent within Nathanael's emotional attachment. Nathanael learns that he had been emotionally involved with an object, and not a living being. Empathy is impossible because the automaton's humanity was an imitation; once the pretense is stripped away, it becomes impossible to form an emotional bond. In particular, Freud notes the doll and automaton as uncanny since they contradict common beliefs about life, consciousness, and free will. The unmasking of Olympia disrupts Nathanael's sense of reality, resulting in madness and eventual death. Through such an act, Hoffmann demonstrates the nature of emotional attachment to artificial life as being fundamentally based on illusion. At the end of *The Sandman*, Hoffmann illustrates how empathy for the automaton is doomed to fail. Once the artificiality is exposed, empathy gives way to terror and revulsion.

#### **4. The Development of Ethical Empathy in Čapek's *R.U.R.***

While Hoffmann represents the automaton as a disturbing illusion of horror, in *R.U.R.*, Karel Čapek imagines a world in which artificial life is portrayed as moral and sentient and thus deserving of empathy. Set in early twentieth century times marked by technological and industrial changes and progress, the play shows how the perception of artificial beings evolved with time, shifting from viewing robots as mere copies or machines into regarding them as conscious and capable of experiencing things and feeling emotions.

##### **4.1 Robots as Labor Instruments and Human Disassociation**

When the play starts, robots are seen as mere instruments of labor that have no significance beyond serving as productive agents. Created as industrial products, they become tools devoid of personality and of humanity due to the process of mass production and its emphasis on economy and efficiency. This depiction relates to the idea of the human body being perceived as an instrument of production, which is a topic frequently discussed when referring to industrial modernity. As a result, robots lack any form of personhood because they are considered manufactured products and not living beings. Initially, there is no empathy shown towards the robots because humans view robots as non-sentient objects. Robots are viewed as tools and/or slaves that exist on a totally different plane compared to their creators who are their masters.

##### **4.2 Robot Emotions and Consciousness**

However, as the play develops, the robots start exhibiting emotions, desires and consciousness that challenge human perceptions about robots' mechanical nature. They gain ability to feel pain, raise questions regarding their existence and express dissatisfaction regarding their mistreatment. This demonstrates that the robots challenge conventional perceptions regarding the essence of what constitutes humanness. In fact, Čapek implies that biological origins do not provide sufficient basis for human personhood; rather, consciousness and emotions are more important. The emergence of emotion in robots challenges humanness because artificial life forms also possess inner world akin to that of humans. The rebellion of robots against human authority is caused not by irrational behavior but by conscious awareness of wrongdoings.

##### **4.3 Human Recognition of Artificial Sentience**

Ultimately, however, the robots become increasingly sympathetic due to their emotional and moral complexities. It is impossible for human characters—and the reader—to deny that the feelings and needs of the robots are identical to those of humans. Sympathy with the robot becomes an ethical stance, not a deception, as was the case with Nathanael's projection on Olympia. Emotional recognition in *R.U.R.* does not emerge out of fantasy but from the realization of consciousness and vulnerability. Čapek thus elevates artificial creatures into moral subjects worthy of empathy and ethical treatment.

#### **5. Comparative Analysis: The Evolution of Human Empathy Toward the Automaton**

Comparison of *The Sandman* by E.T.A. Hoffmann and *R.U.R.* by Karel Čapek illustrates a significant shift in literature in terms of depiction of human emotional reactions to artificially created beings. Even though both stories discuss similar themes about artificial humans blurring the line between the living and mechanisms, the cultural and philosophical approaches to artificiality, personhood, and empathy in each story are different. Hoffmann introduces an automaton as an object of horror, madness, and deception while Čapek turns the perception around and views the creation as an oppressed character capable of emotions worthy of moral attention. This evolution in attitude towards artificial beings can be seen as part of literary change from seeing these creatures as mere fakes to being regarded as real ethical and emotional agents.

##### **5.1 From Horror in the Gothic Style to Human Sympathy**

*The Sandman* by E.T.A. Hoffmann belongs to the Gothic genre; the automaton is depicted as a horrifying creature in this story. The fear of artificiality has been deeply rooted since Nathanael was young and stems from the psychological trauma resulting from the story of the supernatural entity called the Sandman. According to Nathanael, the Sandman's story had made him develop an obsession with horror and monsters and had made

him like “nothing better than hearing or reading horrific stories about goblins, witches, dwarfs, and so forth” (Hoffmann 87). The psychological association between artificiality and distorted human forms with fear and imagination, therefore, begins at an early age. The idea of Freud’s theory on the uncanny is very appropriate in this context, as the terror felt by Nathanael comes from the blurring of boundaries between familiar and unfamiliar things. As Freud explains, the uncanny happens when something becomes both familiar and frightening at once (Freud 124). It can be seen when Nathanael sees his father turn into a monster while undergoing an alchemy experiment with Coppelius: “a horrible, agonizing convulsion seemed to have contorted his gentle, honest face into the hideous, repulsive mask of a fiend” (Hoffmann 90). This iconic figure takes on an unrecognizable form of horror that signals Olympia’s future function as a human-like creation but without a living soul. Unlike the Gothic genre of literature, *R.U.R.* places robots within the context of industrialization. The author begins by depicting them as efficient creations created through scientific means for economic purposes. Robots possess physical appearances that resemble those of humans. This similarity leads Helena to note that the robot “one would never suspect had been produced from some other material than we” because “she had the characteristically soft hair of a blonde” (Čapek, Prologue 10). In contrast to Olympia, who appears realistic but serves as a source of deceit and harm, robots in *R.U.R.* have human-like appearances that inspire familiarity. Yet, the audience’s sympathy toward the machines is built up throughout the play, showing how they suffer and are exploited. Sympathy changes its orientation from the side of humans toward the robots and indicates the possibility of empathy directed at the mechanical creature that suffers. Consequently, while Hoffmann presents artificial life as a disruption and fear-inducing element, Čapek changes the artificial entity into an oppressed Other requiring sympathy.

### 5.2 The Automaton as Reflection of Human Anxiety

Although the texts depict artificial creatures in different ways, the writers utilize them as mirrors of human anxiety and fear. In Hoffmann’s story, Olympia becomes a reflection of personal mental disorders and male narcissism. Nathanael does not love Olympia because she is herself but because of how he perceives her. As Misselhorn notes, the phenomenon that Nathanael demonstrates is referred to as emotional projection in which the person does not see the real other but projects emotions on him/her (105). In the end, her artificiality brings into question not only her authenticity but that of human perception, too, for it is Nathanael’s inability to tell the difference between real and artificial person that raises questions about the criteria we rely upon in defining ourselves as humans. The automaton thus serves as the author’s reflection of anxiety over perception, self-deception, and even deception at the very foundation of emotional relationships. Like the automaton, the robots created in *R.U.R.* are products of the era’s socio-political rather than psycho-philosophical anxieties. For example, their creation was motivated not by some romantic longing for an object of worship or by some existential contemplation of the nature of man but by capitalist utilitarianism. As explained by Domin, Rossum came up with the idea of making workers artificial so that there would be “a worker with the least amount of requirements” and reducing humanity to efficiency (Čapek, Prologue 9). The author also criticizes modernity by introducing a world where technological development deprived people of hardship, work, and even reproduction. According to Alquist, “now that human labor has become unnecessary” (Čapek 1.212). This line shows that the threat from *R.U.R.* does not come from the robots, but from man’s over-reliance on machines and ease. The robots are used here to represent how man, in its quest to create artificial perfection, wants to eradicate struggle and effort. Therefore, while Hoffmann uses his automaton as an object of existential fears and inner psychological anxiety, Čapek’s robots are used to symbolize society’s fears about industrialism, capitalism, and excess technology.

### 5.3 Changing Ethical Perceptions of Artificial Humanity

One of the major differences between the two texts is the changing ethical perspective of the automaton. While the automaton of Hoffmann remains lifeless throughout the narrative, Olympia can neither think nor feel, and it remains as much a mechanical object as the wooden doll. Thus, the protagonist’s infatuation is shown as nothing more than a fantasy, and it confirms once again that artificially created entities cannot be empathic beings. The Robots, however, slowly evolve out of their position as mere tools into morally complicated entities. Initially dismissed as something disgusting, repulsive, and sub-human—“One doesn’t know whether to be disgusted or to hate them, or perhaps—to pity them” (Čapek, Prologue 42)—they begin to show signs of suffering, emotion, and self-awareness. This transformation is in line with the tenets of posthumanism, which eschews the clear-cut division between human and non-human and instead bases one’s humanity on consciousness, emotions, and agency, as opposed to physicality (Haraway 149; Hayles 2–3). As the Robots

become more self-aware, the superiority of human morality comes into question. Rather than being emotionally rich, noble beings, humans become self-centered, spiritually barren creatures. Busman comments that history is “not made by great dreams, but by the petty wants of... selfish people” (Čapek 2.167). Yet, the robots come to stand for solidarity, suffering, and emotional depth. Despite the certainty that “The Robots will die out,” while “mankind will endure” (Čapek 2.276-278), the drama undermines this certainty by implying that life artificial might become dominant in the future. The superiority of mankind is completely undermined in the play, and the robots are portrayed as the next step in the development of consciousness. This move is absolutely contrary to the moral approach of Hoffmann in *The Sandman* since he was sure that it is impossible to feel true empathy towards the artificial beings. *R.U.R.* proposes extending one’s empathy not only towards other people but to everyone who has consciousness, experiences suffering and emotions.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Results of the Study

This paper demonstrates how empathy towards artificial beings changes from the period of Hoffmann's *The Sandman* until the time of Čapek's *R.U.R.*. In the former text, empathy is shown to be false, self-destructive, and rooted in illusions until the artificial nature of the being is uncovered. Instead, in Čapek’s play *R.U.R.*, the development of robots into beings with real consciousness, emotions, and morals inspires empathy from both characters and readers towards these creations. This shift demonstrates a broader cultural transition from the Romantic skepticism towards the replication of natural beings to an appreciation for the morality of artificial consciousness. These works collectively map out the evolution of literature around the automaton from an object of dread into an object of ethical concern, foreshadowing current discussions on artificial intelligence and machine consciousness.

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