SuperSummary™

R.U.R.

Karel Čapek

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Summary

R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots) is a play by Karel Čapek. Čapek was a Czech writer who produced work in many genres, including journalism, essays, plays, short stories, novels, and translations of French poetry. *R.U.R.* premiered in 1921 at Prague's National Theater. It is based on a short story by Karel Čapek and his brother Josef Čapek called "The System," which was published in 1908. Čapek categorized *R.U.R.* as a collective drama, but it is generally considered a work of science or speculative fiction. The original 1921 posters that advertised the play said that it took place in the year 2000, after the invention and widespread use of robots.

In *R.U.R.*, Čapek imagines a future world where robots become the world's workers, laboring for humans. He uses the robots' revolt and eventual annihilation of the human race to explore what it means to be human and the purpose of human life. The working conditions of Rossum's factory offer an opportunity to explore power dynamics created by labor. The theme of **Love** is central in the play—engendering powerful and healing emotions for both humans and robots.

This guide cites the 2004 Penguin Classics edition, translated into English by Claudia Novack, with an introduction by Ivan Klima.

Plot Summary

The play opens with Domin, a director of Rossum's Universal Robots (R.U.R.), a factory that supplies the world with robots. Domin is working with his robot secretary. He takes a meeting with Helena Glory, the president's daughter. She mistakes his secretary for a human. Domin tells her that all the factory workers are robots, and explains how the Rossums—father and son—created robots.

When Helena meets the other directors of R.U.R., she mistakes them all for robots, and tries to organize them to rally for better working conditions. Domin explains that the directors are the only humans in the factory. They discuss making the robots more human, and all of the men fall in love with Helena. At the end of the prologue, Domin proposes to Helena.

Ten years later, the directors are meeting once more. Robots have been malfunctioning and war is spreading, with robots killing humans. Domin and Helena, now married, are celebrating the anniversary of Helena's arrival at the factory. Domin is secretly worried because they haven't received mail in weeks.

Helena and her nurse read an old newspaper, learning that human women have become infertile. Helena talks with one of the malfunctioning robots, Radius, who professes a desire to destroy humans and rule in their place. Helena prevents him from being destroyed, seeing something human in him. He leads a widespread robot revolt, and revolutionaries surround the factory. Meanwhile, Helena burns Rossum's original manuscript, which includes the secret of how to produce robots.

The R.U.R. directors electrify the fence and discuss the nature of the world, humanity, and robots. One of the directors balances the company's accounts, while the others vote on whether to give the robots Rossum's manuscript in exchange for their lives, or destroy it. A few robots die trying to break through the fence. One director, Busman, tries to buy their freedom, but accidentally electrocutes himself while flinging around a suitcase full of money. The robots successfully break through and kill all the humans, with the exception of Alquist, whom they consider robotic because of his building skills and dedication to work.

Later, the robots hold Alquist as the last living human. Alquist decides that he will try to help the robots, since he can no longer help humanity, but he lacks the ability to do so without the manuscript. The robots command him to dissect living robots in order to give them the ability to reproduce, but he refuses. After further threats, he complies, but can't finish the vivisection.

Meanwhile, Robot Primus and Robot Helena, a robotic counterpart to the human Helena, are flirting and laughing. This reminds Alquist of humans. He confirms that both Helena and Primus would rather die than let the other be hurt, showing true humanity. He tells them to go out in the world as the new Adam and Eve, and reads from the Bible about the nature of the world.

Background

Literary Context: Influence on Science Fiction

Čapek's *R.U.R.* is credited with inventing the word "robot." In Ivan Klima's introduction to *R.U.R.*, he notes that the play is based on a short story cowritten by Karel Čapek and his brother, Josef, "The System." It was Josef who invented the word robot, Klima argues.

Karel Čapek was influenced by writers such as Leo Tolstoy, and he was skeptical of the sciences replacing religion. Klima's introduction also includes a quote from *The Saturday Review* of July 23, 1923: Čapek dubs Alquist "the Tolstoian architect" who believes "technical developments demoralize man" (xiv). Other scholars trace Čapek's ideas about robots back to E. T. A. Hoffman's 1817 short story "The Sandman," which includes a human falling in love with a beautiful female automaton, similar to Robot Helena.

Several science fiction tropes, or staples of the genre, come from *R.U.R.* The act of mistaking humans for robots, and vice versa, appears again in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which was adapted into the film *Blade Runner*.

Čapek's narrative, where robots kill all of humanity and take over the earth, is seen in one of the most famous pieces of popular science fiction, *The Matrix*. Before that blockbuster film, the threat of robots killing humans was taken up by science fiction author Issac Asimov in his "Three Laws of Robots." These prohibited robots from harming humans, and were included in his short story collection titled *I, Robot*, also adapted into a film. Works of contemporary philosophy still reckon with the ideas proposed by Čapek. Donna Haraway's philosophical piece *Cyborg Manifesto* takes a deeper look into the hybridity of humans and machines, speaking to the ending of *R.U.R.* where Robot Helena gains the ability to organically procreate.

Philosophical Context: Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic

The play uses Georg Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic. Hegel is today considered primarily a philosopher, but during his time he engaged mostly in anthropology. Dialectics are combinations of two ideas or phenomena that contradict each other—thesis and antithesis—but combine into a greater definition or concept: Synthesis. Within the parable of the Master-Slave dialectic, Hegel proposes that consciousness is self-justifying

and exists to itself without external verification, and that two conscious beings meeting will struggle to find out who is superior. The dominant being becomes the master, while the weaker becomes the slave.

However, the slave is able to recognize their consciousness through productive work, while the master is only able to exhibit their consciousness through the recognition of the slave by giving them orders. In this manner, Hegel proposes that the master, though dominant, becomes terrified of the slave's ability to exist without recognition. In *R.U.R.*, the story starts with the humans as clear master, treating the robots as slaves. Despite this, Helena later confesses to hate and fear the robots, the way that Hegel theorized the master fears the slave.

Later in the play, Radius the robot confesses to wanting to be master over man, and to be free from work. Radius self-recognizes, fulfilling the master-slave dialectic as a slave.

Act Summaries & Analyses

Prologue

Prologue Summary

Domin, a corporate director, works with Sulla, his robot secretary, in Rossum's Universal Robot factory. Helena, the daughter of President Glory, arrives in his office. Domin tells her about the history of creating robots, including old Rossum's early attempts to make people by recreating all of their parts. Later, Rossum's son decided to make labor machines by simplifying their parts, thus getting rid of their "soul" (9).

Domin introduces Helena to Sulla. Helena believes Sulla is human as they talk about the ship on which Helena arrived, the Amelia. After Sulla speaks in multiple languages, Helena calls Domin a liar. Domin offers to prove Sulla is a robot by dissecting her. Helena is horrified and refuses to allow it. Domin explains that all the factory workers are robots, and offers to show Helena the vats and mills where robot parts are made. He explains how they educate the robots, but admits he wants to talk about things other than work.

The other directors—Gall, Hallemeier, Fabry, Alquist, and Busman—enter Domin's office. Helena believes they are robots. She admits she's from the League of Humanity and came to improve the robots' quality of life. Domin clarifies that the directors are not robots: Only factory workers or staff are. The directors are all human. Domin says many people have come to incite the robots, and she is welcome to talk to them.

The directors want to treat the robots well, but they can't give them souls. Some of the robots have been having fits; Gall is working on introducing pain so they don't hurt themselves in the machines at the factory. Busman and Helena discuss the cost of clothing, food, and labor. Domin believes robots replacing humans in jobs will leave humans free to enjoy leisure activities and not have to work. Young Rossum, Domin says, "chucked everything not directly related to work, and in doing so he pretty much discarded the human being and created the Robot" (9). Alquist argues that it is good to work.

The directors leave the office to cook lunch for Helena. Helena asks if the robots have sex, and Domin says no. Domin proposes to Helena. He says the other directors also want to marry her, and insists that she marry one of them if not him. When Domin puts his hands on

her shoulders, she calls him brutish and insane. The others return and Domin releases her. They start setting the table for lunch.

Prologue Analysis

The Prologue, which takes place ten years before Act I, introduces the play's themes and symbols. A central theme of *R.U.R.* is **The Purpose and Nature of Human Existence**. The play raises the question of whether work is a fundamental part of being human, or if humans derive meaning outside of labor. Čapek explores this in the history that Domin provides about Young Rossum, and Alquist's argument that working is part of living a moral life: "[T]here was some kind of virtue in work and fatigue," Alquist says (21). Indeed, Alquist's personal dedication to working is why the robots spare his life in the end.

In contrast to Young Rossum, Old Rossum did not want to create labor machines, but people. The production of robots, he wrote among his formulae, is "another process, simpler, more moldable and faster, that nature has not hit upon at all" (6). He wants to wield the power of nature, or God. This idea returns in Act I, when Gall says that nature is angry at humans for making robots, punishing them with infertility.

The Prologue also introduces the theme of **Love and Beauty**. Helena asks the directors what the robots, as labor machines, lack: "No love or defiance, either?" (19). Robots do not demonstrate love until the end of the play. In the prologue, the directors are motivated by their love for Helena. This distinguishes them as human and informs their actions throughout the play.

The dissection of the robot Damon and the threat to dissect the robot Helena occurs in the Prologue: When Helena doubts that Sulla is a robot, Domin offers to have her dissected. Dissection, the act of revealing anatomical facts, separates humans from robots.

The Prologue also introduces the symbols of flowers and boats. Hallemeier asks Helena: "Did you come on the *Amelia*?" (15), mentioning the name of the boat that appears again near the end of the play. At the close of the Prologue, there is a stage direction: "FABRY *is carrying flowers*" (24). As the directors prepare lunch for Helena, flowers appear on stage. Flowers connect the Prologue with Act I: An initial stage direction in Act I is for Domin, Fabry, and Hallemeier to enter "*carrying whole armfuls of flowers and flower pots*" (25).

Act I

Act I Summary

Ten years after the prologue, Domin, Fabry, and Hallemeier enter Helena's sitting room. They arrange flowers and talk vaguely about problems with robots. When Helena and her nurse Nana enter, the directors leave. Helena and Nana discuss robots having fits and their dislike of and pity for the robots. Domin returns, announces it's the anniversary of Helena's arrival, and they—now a married couple—kiss. He gives her gifts from Busman, Fabry, and Gall, and explains that Hallemeier made the flowers. Domin shows Helena his gift—a gunboat outside the window.

Domin says they haven't gotten mail for a week, and claims to not be worried. Domin and Helena discuss events between the Prologue and the current moment—human workers destroying robots, robots killing people with weapons in defense, and wars fought with robot soldiers run by the governments. Helena wants to run away with the directors. Fabry phones Domin with news that causes him to leave Helena. Domin tells her to not go outside.

Helena sends Nana to find a newspaper, but the only one she can find is a week old. Nana reads about war in the Balkans where robots killed humans. She also reads about how people aren't being born—there are no human babies. Nana believes this is God's punishment for the creation of robots. Helena laments human infertility and calls to Alquist from the window.

When he comes in, they talk about taking a trip on the boat. He won't answer her question about what's going on. Alquist says he builds when he feels uneasy. She notes that building is all he's done for years. He admits to being against progress. While he prays for the directors to be forgiven, his faith isn't as strong as Nana's. Helena asks why women are not having babies. Alquist believes it is because of the lack of human labor. Humans are living in a paradise or orgy in a world run by robots. As he leaves, he says they'll meet at 11.

Helena wonders if the flowers are sterile. She asks Nana to summon the robot who had a fit. Meanwhile, Helena calls Gall, asking him to come to her room. When the robot Radius comes in, he says he wants to be the master of people. He refuses to work for humans because they do not work—they only speak. He would rather be killed at the stamping mill than work for people anymore. Because of his education and special programming, Helena writes a note saying he is not to be sent to the stamping mill.

Gall arrives, and Helena explains that Radius had a fit. Gall examines Radius's pupils and pain reactions before dismissing him. Gall says it was not the fits, which they have named Robot Palsy, but defiance. Helena and Gall wonder if Radius has a soul, and Helena learns that all the robots with special programming are more human. One of these robots, Damon, was sold. Another, Robot Helena, is beautiful and unable to bear children. Gall hypothesizes why human children are no longer being born—nature is upset by robots. Helena and Gall also talk about how people can't live without robots. After Helena learns that the flowers are sterile, she dismisses Gall.

Helena asks Nana to build a fire in the fireplace, which confuses Nana because it is summer. Helena collects Rossum's manuscript, which explains how to build robots, and burns it, while asking Nana if it is ok to burn money and inventions. Nana says it is. However, Helena is shocked at her own actions. Nana leaves as Domin, Hallemeier, Gall, and Alquist enter. The men are wearing medals and celebrating. They say Fabry and Busman are at the docks. When Domin asks what burned, Helena says nothing and leaves to get glasses and a bottle.

The directors drink and tell Helena that a boat is coming. They then tell her the revolt of the robots is over. The robots have formed a union, which Domin calls a revolution. The group of humans have been isolated; they have received no telegraphs, and boats have not arrived. However, a mail boat is supposed to arrive that day, back on schedule. Domin admits to buying the gunboat six months earlier and hiding the revolution from Helena. Domin tells her they would use Rossum's manuscript as leverage if the robots came for their heads. Helena doesn't tell him that she burned it; she simply insists that they should leave.

Domin says that they can't leave because they are beginning production of national robots in factories all over. This will cause the robots to hate other nationalities of robots, and they will no longer organize across borders. Helena tries to argue against this, but Fabry arrives and interrupts her. Helena goes to fetch lunch. Fabry says the only mail that arrived is pamphlets about the union of Rossum's Universal Robots. The pamphlets say that robots are superior to humans, and humans are parasites who need to be killed. Robots plan to continue working after all the humans are dead.

Busman comes in, and Domin says they should get on the gunboat, the Ultimus. Busman mentions there are robots on it, so they abandon the idea. Domin gets out his gun and says he's going to rescue the people in the power plant. However, they are surrounded. Helena

returns with a pamphlet from a robot in the kitchen. Factory whistles and sirens go off; Domin assumes this is the signal to attack since it isn't noon.

Act I Analysis

Act I develops themes and motifs about sin, **Love and Beauty**, and **The Role of Violence**. Violence and the threat of violence permeates the play. Domin carries a revolver in response to the robot uprisings and uses it in the directors' fight against the robots at the end of Act II. The gunboat that Domin says is a present for Helena also reflects the play's violent backdrop. Later, the robots turn the boat's guns on the directors. Robots are a form of technology that use other violent technology, such as guns, against people. Humans mass produce their own means of destruction, the play suggests.

A biblical motif runs throughout the play. It concerns Eden, punishment for sin, and the nature of the soul. Nana is the most religious character. She believes that God has punished humanity for creating robots, a way of playing God, by making women unable to have children. Nana's mention of God exiling Adam and Eve from Eden is one of many references to the Book of Genesis. Helena, who is infertile, wishes to return to the era in which people lived in Eden, which is referred to as prelapsarian time. She wants to "start life over from the beginning" (31).

In contrast to the sin of playing God, Alquist argues that work, such as building with his hands, is a moral act: "You have no idea what good it does the hands to level bricks, to place them and to tamp them down—" (34). Manual labor is part of living a virtuous life, to Alquist. This discussion of hands foreshadows how he condemns his hands in Act III for dissecting the living robot, Damon.

Čapek develops the theme of **Love** with the first discussion of Robot Helena. She is one of a select group that Gall created, at Helena's request, to be more human. Gall questions: "[H]ow can she be so beautiful with no capacity to love?" (39). This references the short story "The Sandman" by E. T. A. Hoffman, in which a man falls in love with a girl he later discovers is an automaton. It also foreshadows the ending of the play, where Robot Helena finally demonstrates the ability to love.

Act II

Act II Summary

Helena plays piano offstage while Domin, Gall, and Alquist talk in her sitting room. They discuss the robots that have gathered outside. Fabry and Hallemeier join the other directors. After Fabry attaches wires to the lamp's electric cord, he says the fence is electrified. Busman takes out financial books to balance the factory's accounts. Domin sees the robots turn the cannons on his gunboat, the Ultimus, on the directors.

The humans debate if teaching robots to fight or if simply making robots was morally wrong. Domin argues that robots gave humans the freedom to become aristocrats because they no longer have to work. However, this was not the dream of the original Rossums. As Busman calculates figures, Hallemeier declares hedonism is the answer, inspired by Helena playing the piano. Robots touch the fence and Fabry electrifies it, killing five robots. Domin decides the directors are ghosts, and talks about how they all died years ago.

Alquist asks who is responsible for the end of humanity. Hallemeier blames the robots. Alquist blames science, technology, and all of them. Gall says he's responsible because he made the robots into people. This caused the robots to realize they are superior to and hate humans. Helena comes in, saying she is responsible because she begged Gall to give the robots souls. She was afraid of them, and thought making them more human would keep them from hating humans. Gall denies this, but Helena and Domin agree Gall is protecting her because he loves her, like everyone.

Busman offers to be Helena or Gall's lawyer. Gall clarifies that he only altered several hundred robots. Busman thinks the problem is that they made too many robots, based on demand, so all the people who wanted robots are to blame. He offers to negotiate with the robots, offering Rossum's manuscript in exchange for the directors and Helena's freedom. Domin suggests destroying it. They vote on selling or destroying the manuscript—Fabry, Gall, and Hallemeier vote to sell. Alquist says as God wills, and Busman argues against the others' votes. Helena asks if she gets a vote. Domin says no and goes to get the manuscript.

Fabry, Gall, and Hallemeier fantasize about escaping on a boat and restarting the human race. Domin returns, frantic about the missing manuscript. Helena admits she stole and burned it. Domin finds only one fragment of it in the fireplace. Gall admits he needs the

manuscript to make robots—he hasn't memorized the contents. Domin asks Helena why she burned it. She says she believes people are no longer being born because of robots and wants to return to the era before robots were invented.

Fabry, Gall, and Hallemeier realize that, without the manuscript, the robots will not be able to reproduce and will die off. Busman talks about the half a billion in the safe and leaves. The humans look out at the robots and see Radius is their leader. Hallemeier suggests that Fabry shoot him, and Fabry aims. Helena asks him to stop. He does, despite Hallemeier's objections. They watch Busman approach the robots with the money from the safe, accidentally touch the electric fence, and die. The directors mourn him.

Turning on the lamp, the humans discuss its light and the end of humanity. The lamp goes out, signaling that the robots have taken over the power plant. Nana comes in, tells them to repent, and runs out. Gall, Fabry, and Alquist scatter and exchange gunfire with robots. Domin and Helena go off through the same door. Hallemeier stays behind, barricading himself with a toilet. A robot breaks through the barricade and stabs Hallemeier, killing him.

Radius and other robots enter, one dragging Alquist. Alquist mourns Hellemeier and tells the robots to kill him. However, the robots find his building skills useful and robotic; Radius orders Alquist to work for the robots. Radius declares victory over humans. He says that the robots now rule over everything.

Act II Analysis

The conflict between the humans and the robots climaxes. The first director to die, Busman, spends much of the act working on Rossum's finances. His stage direction reads—"*sets to work*" on accounts (53). However, money is not what motivates the robots. As Hallemeier says, Busman dies covered in the currency that he hoped would persuade the robots. The robots are after something greater than money: the desire for sovereignty. In fighting to be free from humans, they echo what humans have done for centuries, such as when the American colonies revolted against England. The robots' human want for independence and power is the undoing of the humans who created them.

Death looms. The play explores hauntology—the presence of death, the dead, and legacies. Domin suggests that "[w]e were probably killed a hundred years ago and only our ghosts are left haunting this place" (55). When trying to place blame for the robot uprising, Domin

alludes to hauntology, saying the directors are "[t]he dead trying the dead" (57). Their fates are sealed—all the humans except Alquist die at the end of Act II. Before their physical deaths, the play suggests that they died on a spiritual level by playing God in their production of robots.

This unholy act dooms the human souls before the robots destroy their bodies. Fabry has some measure of hope in the end. He turns on the lamp which has aided in electrocuting robots and says: "Burn, holy candle of humanity!" (68). However, shortly thereafter, a stage direction notes that the "*lamp goes out*" as the robots take over the power plant (68). This is a symbolic moment: The light—representing the goodness of humanity—is lost.

Unlike the other humans, Alquist lives until the end of the play. This is because of the nature of his labor: He works with his hands. In his victory speech, Radius references Charles Darwin's theory of evolution: "The world belongs to the fittest" (70). Robots, rather than humans, excel at manual labor. This means they are more fit, in Radius's mind.

Act III

Act III Summary

In one of the factory's laboratories, Alquist sits at a desk, looking through books. He laments not being able to figure out the secret of Rossum's manuscript. He mourns the loss of all the people and the stars. Staring in a mirror, he talks about being old and the last human alive. A robot servant enters and says the Central Committee of Robots is waiting. After hearing that no humans have been found, Alquist tells the robot to send in the committee. If he can't save humans, Alquist wants to at least save the robots.

Radius and four other robots enter. They bemoan how the efforts to reproduce robots have been failures and demand that Alquist share the secret of how to make robots or they will kill him. He says they can kill him because he doesn't know the secret. One robot identifies himself as Damon, the Ruler of the Robots. The robots claim killing all the humans was an act of becoming more human, because humans kill one another, and that robots now have souls. Alquist suggests robots mate like animals. He repeats that Rossum's formula for producing robots was burned.

Damon suggests that Alquist experiment on live robots. Alquist says he's too old, but Damon insists. Alquist says Damon should be the one to be dissected. They go offstage, where

Damon is held down as Alquist cuts into him. Robot Helena and Robot Primus run onstage, hearing Damon's screams. Alquist comes back onstage in his bloodstained lab coat and refuses to continue cutting into Damon, even though both Damon and Radius demand he continue to experiment.

Alquist orders everyone out and laments what his hands have done. Damon stumbles onstage, bloody, declaring he wants to live. Robot Helena comes back to help Alquist wash his hands. He refuses to call her Helena, and she leaves. Alquist is upset over his lack of progress and at the sun's progress in rising. He hides under a black cloak on a couch.

Robots Helena and Primus enter the lab and discuss the scientific equipment. Helena spills a test tube. She looks at Alquist's formulae, but doesn't understand them. Primus finds the work interesting, but Helena calls him over to look out the window. Helena hurts and fears she's dying. Primus says it would be best to die while sleeping, and that he's been dreaming about her. Helena says she found a beautiful house with a garden and dogs. He calls her beautiful and they flirt in front of a mirror. Her laughter wakes up Alquist, who thinks they are people. Helena runs off when Alquist touches her.

Alquist decides to dissect Helena, and Primus threatens to smash his head in. He begs Alquist to experiment on him instead of Helena. Helena returns, and Alquist tells her that he is going to dissect Primus. She cries and says she wants to be dissected instead of Primus. Primus refuses to let her submit to dissection, and tells Alquist that they belong to one another, not him. He sends them out to become a new Adam and Eve.

After they go, Alquist reads from the Bible about the creation of people in the Book of Genesis. He asserts that love is better than technology, and declares to God that the love between the robots will create and sustain life.

Act III Analysis

Act III takes place after the war where all humans—except Alquist—died. It develops the themes of **Love** and **The Purpose and Nature of Human Existence**. Robots—with the help of Gall changing them to be more like people—evolve to love one another. A robot says: "We were machines, sir, but from horror and suffering we've become [...] beings with souls" (75). Gaining souls makes the robots more human.

Alquist was once proud of how his hands performed labor. Now, after dissecting the fully conscious Damon, looks at them in horror: “Hands, how could you?—Hands that used to love honest work, how could you do such a thing? My hands! My hands!” (77-78). This alludes to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* where Lady Macbeth is unable to wash the blood of murder off her hands.

In becoming more like humans, the robots experience a complex range of emotions. On one hand, they have learned hatred of humans, and engage in violence and war. Yet like humans they are also capable of love. When Robots Helena and Primus try to sacrifice themselves to save the other from dissection, Alquist realizes that they have evolved to love one another. The play suggests that to be human—as shown by the humanlike robots—is to be capable of great emotion on both ends of the spectrum.

The robots’ romantic love is connected to procreation and the biblical Garden of Eden. Alquist sends them off to learn to reproduce by physical contact: “Go, Adam. Go, Eve—be a wife to Primus. Be a husband to Helena, Primus” (84). They, like the characters in Genesis, will be the first to create a new population. The play ends with Alquist connecting love and life. He prays to God, saying his eyes have “beheld Thy deliverance through love, and life shall not perish” (84).

Character Analysis

Helena Glory

Helena is described as “very elegant” (2), having a “feminine” (25) style, and beautiful. She comes to the factory on behalf of the League of Humanity. She intends to rally the robots to organize for pay and better treatment. However, she is naïve, unsure of the cost of goods and easily impressed by the directors. She marries Domin, but is loved by all the men in the play and affectionate toward them all.

Before her death at the end of Act II, Helena acts rashly out of emotion. She burns Rossum’s manuscript that describes how to make robots because of how she feels about the infertility of human women. She longs for a pre-robot world. She never learns to be practical or pragmatic which Robot Helena, her robotic counterpart, mirrors.

Helena’s name is a variation of Helen, which means shining light. Her character alludes to Helen of Troy from Greek mythology. In mythological accounts, Helen is blamed for starting the Trojan War. Her beauty captivates Paris, a Trojan prince, who abducts her from her Greek husband. The Greek army fights the Trojans to reclaim her. Similarly, one can argue that Helena starts the war between the robots and humans; she longs for robots to become more human, and convinces Gall to change their programming. This transformation drives the robots to seek sovereignty.

Alquist

Alquist, a builder and chief of construction, is “older than the rest, carelessly dressed, with long, grizzled hair and whiskers” (2). Čapek explores what it means to be human through his character. A central question in the play is whether work diverts or enables humanity to achieve meaning. Alquist believes work is a virtuous act: People are not meant to simply live a life of leisure, and labor is a way of deriving fulfillment.

The robots spare Alquist’s life during the revolution; of all the humans, he is the most similar to them. Radius says Alquist “is a Robot. […] He builds houses. He can work” (70). Alquist is also the most religious of the directors, and quotes the Bible in his final monologue. His

attitude is akin to a Protestant work ethic—God rewards work, specifically manual labor, with an immortal soul. Čapek suggests that standing with the workers is the morally correct choice; he makes Alquist the main character of Act III and the play's sole human survivor.

Harry Domin

Domin, as he is referred to in the dialogue tags, is a corporate director of Rossum's Universal Robots. He is "thirty-eight years old in the Prologue, tall, clean-shaven" (2). He is the first character to appear and speak on stage, and dies at the end of Act II. He is a main character for most of the play, his death unexpected.

Domin and Alquist are foils, or characters that highlight one another's traits through contrasting qualities. Unlike Alquist, Domin does not believe that people should have to work. He holds that leisure, rather than labor, elevate the individual. He is a villain, treating the robots as unpaid **and enslaved** laborers. His cruelty suggests that his worldview is incorrect.

The Robots: Radius, Helena, and Primus

There are 11 robots, named and unnamed, as well as "numerous other Robots" (2). Of these, Radius, Helena, and Primus are the most significant. Radius rebels in Act I, acting out of "defiance, rage, revolt" rather than the malfunction called Robot Palsy (38). Gall, at Helena's request, give him and Robot Helena more of a human personality. Radius' sense of rebellion grows throughout the play. He leads the robot revolution in Act II, killing humans, ordering that humans be killed, and sparing Alquist's life. In Act III, he remains a leader among the robots, working with Damon, who is dubbed the Ruler of the Robots.

The hierarchy in robot society mirrors that found in human society, with leaders and followers. This shows how the robots have humanlike qualities. *R.U.R.* echoes George Orwell's *Animal Farm.* In the novel *Animal Farm*, the animals revolt from the tyrannical humans, only to replicate their pecking order. Similarly, the robots revolt against humanity and end up mirroring them.

We see this in the way that Robots Helena and Primus demonstrate romantic love, a human trait. They each try to sacrifice themselves to save the other. This proves to Alquist that robots have souls and are the ones who will continue life on earth. It also shows that robots—and humans—are nuanced: They kill one another but they also are capable of loyalty and devotion.

The Directors: Fabry, Dr. Gall, Dr. Hallemeier, and Busman

These directors fill supporting roles to the main characters of Domin, Helena, and Alquist. They all dote upon Helena, and generally side with Domin in arguments about robots. In the Prologue, Helena initially mistakes them for robots, which speaks to their similarity. The humans in the play have robotic qualities, such as interchangeableness, the way that robots have anthropomorphic or human ones.

Themes

The Purpose and Nature of Human Existence

The characters in *R.U.R.* debate existential questions, or questions pertaining to the meaning of existence. One such question is: What is the purpose of life? Is life is meant to be enjoyed and to be continued? Domin dreams of a world where "[p]eople will do only what they enjoy" (21). Alquist argues that "[o]nly people can procreate" (74), and that giving birth is central to the human experience. However, humans are also the parents of robots. As an unnamed Third Robot declares: "People are our fathers!" (75). Robots evolve to continue life, and Robots Helena and Primus fall in love and procreate; this characterizes them as human at the end of the play.

Both humans and robots discuss humanity in a negative light. Domin believes that hatred is part of human nature: "No one can hate more than man hates man! Transform stones into people and they'll stone us!" (58). Making robots more human is to stir up their hatred for people, in Domin's opinion. Damon, a robot leader, echoes this: "You have to kill and rule if you want to be like people. Read history! Read people's books! You have to conquer and murder if you want to be people!" (74). In the opinion of many robots, humanity is defined by its history of war, colonization, and genocide. Busman also comments on history—"history is not made by great dreams, but by the petty wants of all respectable, moderately thievish and selfish people, that is, of everyone" (60). In other words, the motivations for historic actions are not grand or extravagant, but rather base.

Another element of human nature is the soul. Alquist believes humans are damned because of their violence. However, he still considers the fate of his individual soul in the afterlife. At the end of the play, Alquist seems satisfied with his soul's progression after realizing Robots Helena and Primus are in love and sends them off to repopulate the earth as a new Adam and Eve. In the end, his soul's journey is tethered to the salvation of robots, who carry on humanity's legacy.

Power Relations Constructed by Labor

R.U.R. explores how labor creates power dynamics. Workers are separated from those who don't work, creating social classes. Domin aims to use robots to elevate humans and allow them to enjoy a life of leisure: "I wanted to transform all of humanity into a worldwide

aristocracy. Unrestricted, free, and supreme people. Something greater than people" (54). Aristocrats, also called bourgeois, are the social class that does not have to engage in labor to survive. Their opposite is the proletariat class, or the robots, in Domin's ideal world. Alquist coins a word to describe these supreme people: "Supermen" (54). This speaks to the power that comes with freedom from labor. It also alienates people from the conditions in which their goods and services are created and provided.

The term master is used throughout the play. This draws on Hegel's philosophical concept of the master/slave dialectic, discussed in the philosophical context section. Domin "wanted man to become a master" (54), or part of the class that controls workers. Robots who revolt against this dynamic, such as Radius, say they "do not want a master" (37). In other words, they do not want to be controlled by people, especially people who do not work. Furthermore, in becoming more human, the robots desire to control others. Radius says: "I want to be the master of people" (37). The play suggests that wanting power is part of human nature.

By the third act, the power dynamic is flipped: Robots control the earth, and one remaining human, Alquist, does manual labor for them. Radius sees his dream realized when the robots take over Rossum's factory: "He who wants to live must rule. We are the rulers of the earth! Rulers of land and sea! Rulers of the stars!" (70). The robots kill all of the humans—except one. This leaves only robots to rule the planet, and they are willing to work together. However, neither robots nor humans are interested in equality, that is, working side-by-side. Both enact hierarchies. In the end, the robots order Alquist to work for them in a manner similar to how humans ordered around robots.

The Role of Violence

Human nature and the power dynamics created by labor are linked with violence. In the third act, an unnamed Third Robot says to Alquist: "You gave us weapons. We had to become masters" (74). The desire to become masters stems from access to weapons, he argues.

Those with superior weaponry and the ability to organize their forces control labor and social class. Robots are able to organize their union around the world. Domin hopes to defeat the robots by having new factories make "[r]obots of a different color, a different nationality, a different tongue; they'll all be different—as different from one another as fingerprints; they'll no longer be able to conspire with one another" (46). Here, Domin suggests that difference leads to a lack of communication, dissension, and violence.

Alquist subverts this idea. Although he is different from the robots, he does not shoot at them. This makes him stand out among the directors.

Domin's gun is mentioned early in the first act, foreshadowing its use later. Domin's last act onstage involves his weapons, solidifying the link between his ideas about humanity's superiority and hatred. In the Prologue, he shared this belief with Helena: "A man should be a bit of a brute" (24). His aggressive courtship of her shows how violence, for him, is linked with love.

Love and Beauty

R.U.R. has a bookend structure, where the ending echoes the beginning. The play begins with the oddly romantic meeting of Helena and Domin, and ends with the romance between Robots Helena and Primus. Love sandwiches war and violence, the play's middle.

In the work, beauty is the gateway to love. The characters fall in love with Helena, and Robot Helena, because of the way they look. The other directors share Domin's adoration. After the robot revolt and the Rossum factory takeover, Alquist laments how without Helena: "There is no love. O Helena, Helena, Helena!" (72). He believes that her death is the death of love.

Both Primus and Alquist call Robot Helena "beautiful" (80, 83). In other words, her beauty is appreciated by both robot and human eyes. Robot Helena gazes in the mirror, examining her hair, eyes, and lips (81). Here, Čapek uses the poetic device of the blazon, a catalog or list of a woman's features. He also shows how beauty engenders humanity in the robots. Looking at Robot Helena's beauty causes Primus to act protectively. He stands up to Alquist, saying that he and Robot Helena "belong to each other" (83). Alquist's perception of Robot Helena's beauty makes him empathetic to Primus, and to believe Primus has evolved.

The violence of the robots echoes the violence of humanity, suggesting that human nature is centered on hatred and war. However, Alquist ends the play by suggesting that the capacity for love is essential to being a human with a soul. He considers Robots Helena and Primus to be a biblical couple, the first of a new kind of being, machines with human qualities. Their love is proof that they will repopulate the earth. Alquist reconnects with God and experiences joy through his observation of their connection.

Symbols & Motifs

Mirror

In Act III, in the factory laboratory, the prop of a mirror symbolizes how the nature of robots is beginning to reflect human nature. A stage direction notes how Alquist looks in the mirror alone. Later, the Robots Helena and Primus look in it together. This underscores Alquist's line: "If there are no people at least let there be Robots, at least the reflections of man, at least his creation, at least his likeness" (73). Robots are like the images in mirrors—reflections of humans. They reflect what Alquist believes is the most important human characteristic, falling in love. The scene where Robots Helena and Primus flirt mirrors how Helena and Domin flirt in the Prologue.

Flowers

Flowers are another prop that take on symbolic meaning. Helena implies that the flowers reflect the way that human women have become sterile. When referring to the flowers made by Hallemeier, she laments: "Oh, sterile flower!" (36). Later, she explains that she burned Rossum's manuscript because "people had become sterile flowers!" (65). To Helena, humans losing the ability to procreate is "d-r-readful" (65) and requires drastic, violent action. Unlike the men, she does not harm another living being—robotic or human—but enacts violence against a manuscript. This act of destruction contrasts with birth, designed to halt the creation of robots.

The Bible

A biblical or Christian motif runs throughout *R.U.R.*, and develops the theme **of** The Purpose and Nature of Human Existence. The most religious character is Helena's nurse, Nana. She believes that robots have "[n]o fear of God in 'em" (26). When the fearless robots surround the factory and close in on the directors, Fabry says: "Oh, God, a flood, a flood, just once more to preserve human life aboard a single boat" (62). This is a reference to the biblical story of Noah building an ark to preserve animals when God flooded the earth.

The most frequently used Biblical reference is about the Garden of Eden. Nana says—"as God drove man out of paradise, so He'll drive him from the earth itself!" (32). The paradise that God exiled Adam and Eve from was Eden. Nana believes that creating robots is similar to eating the apple from the tree of knowledge. To her, it is the sin of playing God. Alquist's final

monologue contains a direct quote from Genesis that begins: “So God created man in his own image” (84). As the last human, Alquist sees Robots Helena and Primus as a new Adam and Eve, made in the image of humans. After humans are driven from earth by robots, earth becomes a paradise for robots.

Important Quotes

1. “You see, he wanted to somehow scientifically dethrone God.”
(Prologue, Page 7)

Domin talks to Helena about Old Rossum. Rather than create robots as workers, Rossum wanted a new kind of human made by science rather than procreation. His debate with his son, the young Rossum, was over the kind of robot produced, and sprung from their different motives.

2. “Young Rossum successfully invented a worker with the smallest number of needs, but to do so, he had to simplify him.”
(Prologue, Page 9)

Domin discusses the Rossums’ robotic creations. Young Rossum, the son of the original Rossum, is interested in mass production and industry. He created his robots to fill certain roles or, in other words, to occupy a specific class, changing the power relations created by labor.

3. “You’d never guess she was made of a different substance than we are. She even has the characteristic soft hair of a blonde, if you please.”
(Prologue, Page 10)

Here, Domin describes his robot secretary, Sulla, to Helena, explaining that her mistaking Sulla for a human is understandable. She also mistakes humans for robots when meeting the directors, suggesting how robots and humans are alike. The inability to distinguish between the two—human and robot—is a central concern of many works of science fiction created after R.U.R.

4. “DOMIN: That is death, Marius. Do you fear death?
MARIUS: No.”
(Prologue, Page 12)

Domin tries to have Sulla dissected in front of Helena to prove she is a robot. Both she and Marius are unbothered by the idea of themselves or other robots dying by dissection, which sets them apart from humans. This foreshadows how Robots Helena and Primus, in sharp

contrast, refuse to allow each other to be dissected at the end of Act III. They seem to be more human than the humans.

5. "HELENA: Oh, I thought that…if someone were to show them a bit of love— FABRY: Impossible, Miss Glory. Nothing is farther from being human than a Robot."
(Prologue, Page 17)

Though Fabry argues against the humanity of robots, this proves to be untrue. Robot Helena is shown to be more human than some of the other humans through her capacity for love at the end of the play. Love is key to the evolution of robots, and a central theme of the play.

6. "You think that a soul begins with the gnashing of teeth?"
(Prologue, Page 19)

Fabry speaks about the fits that some robots have when they malfunction. The rebellious robots are initially thought to be suffering from this Robotic Palsy, as the directors call the fits. However, Radius's defiance is his rejection of being subjugated—forced to work without pay. His defiance becomes evidence of a soul.

7. "If you won't give them souls, why do you want to give them pain?"
(Prologue, Page 19)

Helena asks Gall why he would allow robots to feel pain without other emotions, like joy or love. Physical pain serves as a safety feature, to protect the robots' bodies. Animals can also feel pain and inflict it on other animals, which is distinctly different from human systems of oppression through labor practices. Systemic oppression harms souls, rather than bodies.

8. "Domin, there was something good in the act of serving, something great in humility. Oh, Harry, there was some kind of virtue in work and fatigue."
(Prologue, Page 21)

Alquist argues for a Protestant work ethic—a divine reward for the work done on earth. He believes that the pre-robotic era was a golden age, a better time than after robots were invented. The invention of robots diminish the opportunities for humans to be rewarded in the afterlife for labor.

9. “O Adam, Adam! no longer will you have to earn your bread by the sweat of your brow; you will return to Paradise, where you were nourished by the hand of God.”
(Prologue, Page 21)

Domin’s lines include the biblical motif that runs throughout the play. He imagines robots will enable the earth to become the Garden of Eden, where humans don’t have to engage in labor. However, at the end of the play, the earth becomes Eden for robots— Alquist refers to Robot Primus as Adam.

10. “People should be a bit loony, Helena. That’s the best thing about them.”
(Prologue, Page 24)

In this passage, Domin develops his ideas about the nature of humanity. He believes that people behave irrationally when not working, a positive thing. Humans are defined by their actions when not working.

11. “Once again, in the last week there has not been a single birth reported.”
(Act I, Page 32)

This is a quote from a newspaper article that Helena reads. Books, newspapers, and pamphlets—physical media—are props in the play and intertextual elements in the written script. Čapek himself was a journalist for many years and includes the medium he worked in as a way of disseminating important information about the state of humanity.

12. “I think it’s better to lay a single brick than to draw up plans that are too great.”
(Act I, Page 34)

Alquist prioritizes manual labor over directing grandiose projects. In other words, he finds the role of worker more appealing than the role of director. The power given to those who order workers around corrupts not only individuals, but systems.

13. “Why have women stopped giving birth? Because the whole world has become Domin’s Sodom!”
(Act I, Page 35)

Here, Alquist alludes to the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, where God punishes wicked actions. Humans are no longer laboring and doing moral work, nor laboring to deliver children. The ability to procreate is lost when humans are free to engage in sin, their lives no longer organized by work schedules.

14. "Robots do everything. You only give orders—utter empty words."
(Act I, Page 37)

Radius speaks to the difference between workers and management, the proletariat (working class) and the bourgeoisie (upper class). The robot workers sustain everyone, while the upper class merely speak, rather than act. The robots respect those who use their hands rather than simply words.

15. "Oh, Helena, Robot Helena, your body will never bring forth life. You'll never be a lover, never a mother."
(Act I, Page 39)

Gall believes that Robot Helena, who he made to be especially beautiful, will never be able to procreate. Alquist believes the opposite at the end of the play. Once Alquist witnesses the love between Robots Helena and Primus, he believes they will act as a married couple—as lovers—and she will bear children.

16. "Just some old papers, d-r-readfully old. Nana, should I burn them?"
(Act I, Page 41)

Helena has a verbal tic, represented here with the two r's and dashes in "dreadfully." The tic appears throughout the play. She obscures what Rossum's manuscript is to Nana while asking permission to burn it. This is another moment of intertextuality in the script. In a staged version, the manuscript would appear as a prop, emphasizing its nature as a piece of physical media.

17. "So you see, Helena. This means a revolution, understand? A revolution of all the Robots in the world."
(Act I, Page 43)

Domin explains a newspaper article to Helena as if she were an unintelligent child. He withholds information, not giving her the option to be fully informed, and then unnecessarily explains articles she has already read. This infantilizing runs throughout the play, emphasizing Domin's desire to control her.

18. "Thunder, we'll make Black Robots and Swedish Robots and Italian Robots and Chinese Robots, and then let someone try to drive the notion of brotherhood into the noggin of their organization."
(Act I, Page 46)

Hallemeier explores the nature of humanity. He believes that making robots more like humans—with different languages and physical features—will destroy their ability to organize internationally. He believes that brotherhood is limited to people who are similar.

19. "Robots of the world, you are ordered to exterminate the human race. Do not spare the men. Do not spare the women. Preserve only the factories, railroads, machines, mines, and raw materials. Destroy everything else. Then return to work. Work must not cease."
(Act I, Page 48)

Domin reads from a pamphlet created as part of the robot revolution organizing efforts. This pamphlet prop is another example of intertextuality and physical media. Its contents emphasize the importance of maintaining the mechanisms of industry while destroying humanity. The pamphlet commends work because humans generally refuse to take part in it; working is what separates the robots from the humans.

20. "Old Rossum thought only of his godless hocus-pocus and young Rossum of his billions. And that wasn't the dream of your R.U.R. shareholders, either. They dreamed of the dividends. And on those dividends humanity will perish."
(Act II, Page 54)

These lines from Alquist are from an exchange with Domin. While Domin says that robots were meant to give humans more freedom, Alquist points out the motives of Rossum, his son, and the people who control the Rossum corporation. These figures who developed robots care about science and money rather than improving the quality of life for humans.

21. "They stopped being machines. You see, they realized their superiority and they hate us."

(Act II, Page 57)

Gall explains the robots' transformation. Their rebellion is because their labor provides all of the goods and services for humans. Robots believe working makes them superior.

22. "Gall, just when did you actually begin this witchcraft?"
(Act II, Page 59)

A minor motif of occult imagery appears in the play. Here, Busman characterizes Galls's experiments to make robots more human as an occult practice. In the Prologue, Domin refers to old Rossum's "potions" when Helena does not understand the harder scientific terms like "catalysts enzymes." Playing God is considered an occult act.

23. "It was a great thing to be a human being. It was something tremendous. I'm suddenly conscious of a million sensations buzzing in me like bees in a hive. Gentlemen, it was a great thing."
(Act II, Page 68)

As the robots surround the factory and attack, Hallemeier reflects on the nature of being human. This passage is an example of how diction, or word choice, changes over the course of the play. Hallemeier uses simile, a literary device where something is compared to something else using "like" or "as"— "I'm suddenly conscious of a million sensations buzzing in me like bees in a hive." The passage's phrasing elevates it above common speech, giving it a more formal tone.

24. "Robots of the world! Many people have fallen. By seizing the factory we have become the masters of everything. The age of mankind is over. A new world has begun! The rule of Robots!"
(Act II, Page 70)

Radius declares victory over humans at the end of Act II. His lines embody Hegel's master-slave duality, with the slave having true dominion over the master.

25. "These books no longer speak. They're as mute as everything else. They died, died along with people."
(Act III, Page 71)

At the beginning of Act III, Alquist is the only living human. Alquist personifies books, giving them human qualities—they once (but no longer) speak. They died. This is also an example of hauntology, or the presence of the dead.

Essay Topics

1. How are social classes and power relations organized by labor in R.U.R.? How does social class in the play echo social class and power in real life?

2. Compare and contrast the different characters' theories about the nature of humanity. Who do you believe Čapek sides with, and why?

3. What is the role of love (and beauty) in the text? How do love and beauty act as gateways for other human emotions, like empathy?

4. How do different characters use biblical motifs in the play? What is Čapek trying to say about humanity using these motifs?

5. How do mirrors function as symbols? Consider mirror props, mirroring discussed in dialogue, and/or characters who mirror one another.

6. What do flowers symbolize in the play? How do they function in the dialogue and as props?

7. Compare and contrast the characters of Helena and Robot Helena. How is Robot Helena more or less human than her counterpart?

8. What is the relationship between labor in the workplace and labor in childbearing? How does procreation, or the lack of procreation, influence the characters' actions and ideas?

9. How do boats and the isolation of the factory function in the play?

10. What elements of *R.U.R.* appear in other works of science fiction? How has Čapek's work influenced science fiction about robots and AI?

Further Reading & Resources

Further Reading: Plays

R.U.R. Rossum's Universal Robots original printing (Czech) (1920) via Internet Archive

This scan of the original printing of the play includes the original cover, drawn by Josef Čapek, Karel Čapek's brother. The play's age is apparent, the play protected by a modern folio, yet broken and worn in places. Distinctions appear between the original and translations. For instance, Helena Glory is named Gloryová in the original.

This original also gives insight into an often-lost aspect of the play: It is one of the only pieces of Czech literature commonly referenced in English. The Nazis and Soviet regimes targeted Czech peoples, with Josef Čapek dying in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Czech art and literature of the interwar period was suppressed after the collapse of democracy in the recently-Soviet Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. However, the play in translation endured.

Further Reading: Beyond Literature

Metropolis (1927) by Fritz Lang, hosted on YouTube

This silent movie portrays a world of mechanized labor, ruled by aristocrats far above. When an aristocrat discovers that the workers are being killed by the extremely dangerous factory machines, he descends into the factories to aid a growing revolution. As a result of his involvement, a robot is created with the appearance of the woman he loves, the beautiful Maria. The Maria robot inspires a violent uprising against the ruling class. This results in the destruction of the factory machines, which endangers all the city's children. *Metropolis*' themes— robots being mistaken for humans, the Hegelian dialectic of two distinct classes, and the threat to the future represented by the endangering of the city's children— closely parallel *R.U.R.* Furthermore, *Metropolis* was released in 1927, only seven years after *R.U.R.*; it reflects the interwar period's concern about the destructive capabilities of technology and an anxiety toward technocratic inequality.

The Second Renaissance hosted at The Matrix 101

This page summarizes and analyzes one of the short films that make up *The Animatrix*, an anthology of works that explore *The Matrix* trilogy. "The Second Renaissance" details the origins of the conflict between humanity and robots, which began with the creation of robots as slaves. Machines "know" humanity's nature, and are therefore capable of both understanding and hurting them. Just like the Robot Council's imprisonment and control of Alquist, the machines imprison and control humanity in the Matrix, in order to reproduce themselves. One particularly graphic scene involves an android (a robot who looks like a human) being beaten to death. She reveals her nature as a robot as she declares "I'm real!"

The Legacy of Rossum's Universal Robots (2019) by Michael Ahr on Den of Geek

This article breaks down some of the more prominent pop-cultural references that *R.U.R.* has inspired, including from *Dr. Who*, *Star Trek*, *Westworld,* and *Batman*. *R.U.R* is believed to have invented the term "robot" to describe an autonomous, human-shaped machine, and has contributed much to the way culture talks about machines; as a play, it has also contributed to science fiction's popularity as a visual medium. The article points out that the play, when televised on the BBC in 1938, was the first science fiction produced on television ever. This demonstrates the work's impact, not just on depictions of machines, but also our ability to imagine the future.