The Portrayal of AI in *All Systems Red[[1]](#footnote-1),* Martha Wells

Journal Article

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AI is a very widespread concept in the modern world of today, and demand is growing for professionals who have an extended knowledge of AI skills that lead to new opportunities. There are many works of fiction in the literary world that portray this new idea in negative ways, such as *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, and *Dune* by Frank Herbert, but this article will explore the way that it is interpreted positively in Martha Wells’ first novella in science fiction series The Murderbot Diaries, *All Systems Red.*

Many writers see this new science concept as a threat to their works, worried that they have, if not will eventually be replaced by these robots and machines that strip human creativity out of writing. Tiffany Yates Martin, of *Foxprint Editorial*, states that, ‘writers feel, not without reason, that they may be an endangered species,’[[2]](#footnote-2) due to the large impact of AI in recent years. Similarly, in a conversation with Culto, Peruvian writer Gabriela Wiener revealed that she is scared by AI, when asked what she thought of the idea, she stated,’ It’s the end of the world. They replaced us with the machine.’[[3]](#footnote-3) These writers are just two among many who have dismissive opinions on AI, but Martha Wells’ novella portrays it in a complete contrasting way, giving it human qualities, and emotions that we can relate to as modern readers. Through the clever characterization of the protagonist, we can see that there is more behind the concept than we think, and so much more to learn about these ‘robots’ that authors believe are threatening their jobs and literary works.

The main character of the novella, Murderbot, is a nongendered imitative security unit, who is part human clone, part robot. The character doesn’t even have an official name, with team members addressing it as ‘secunit.’ ‘Murderbot’ is the name that it gave itself because it feels guilty about an incident when there was a malfunction and it killed 57 members of a mining team it was supposed to protect. The uniqueness of this character is reflected in the way that it has no gender identity and an asexual personality, not wanting to be seen as a ‘sexbot’, which are the only robots with sexual desires. Murderbot states, ‘you don’t need to look at me. I’m not a sexbot,’[[4]](#footnote-4) when one of the characters questions why the protagonist does not want to be looked at, as Murderbot does not want to be seen in any romantic or sexual way by anyone. The way that asexuality is portrayed through the character of Murderbot, who is part robot, emphasizes the human-like feelings that AI can possess. This may influence readers, specifically those who identify as asexual, to read deeper into the qualities and possibilities of AI, as the representation of asexuality is still quite limited in the media and in literature but is shown through Murderbot’s story. Throughout the novella, Murderbot is trying to find a place in society whilst dealing with feelings of being different, which may resonate with (specifically) a younger audience that may consist of people discovering their sexuality. Anya Johanna DeNiro, a transgender writer of tor.com, states, ‘for me as a trans woman, *All Systems Re*d’s concoction of heartbreak and ever-present anxiety felt achingly familiar to me […] as I looked back at various pressure points in my own transition.’[[5]](#footnote-5) This demonstrates that the story of Murderbot is relatable for readers with similar experiences, and she also states, ‘the novella has a lot to say about building a personal identity on the fly.’[[6]](#footnote-6) Murderbot’s discovery of themself through the portrayal of anxiety and paranoia in the novella, exaggerates the human emotion in the novella. Whatever the sexuality of the reader, however, we still resonate with the main character as they try to discover themself in ways that do not just consist of their physical identity, but sexuality and gender identity too.

Furthermore, the protagonist also possesses less complex human emotions such as being introverted and wanting a lack of social interaction. Murderbot is entirely introverted, and, like humans, likes to spend time at home, watching TV and having as little association with humans as possible. The robot states they want to, ‘use the time to watch some Sanctuary Moon and recharge my ability to cope with humans at close quarters without losing my mind.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Watching a favourite TV show in the comfort of your own home would be something that Murderbot and most modern readers will have in common. This gives us the ability to see the protagonist as completely innocent and simple, which contrasts with the threatening concept that authors believe AI possesses. We don’t consider humans who like to relax and watch TV as a threat to our careers, so why would it be different for robots? This could be an analogy for the innocence of AI and how it continues to possess these human-like qualities, cleverly metaphorically portrayed by Wells. The humans in the story are surprised by Murderbot’s access to human culture, even accusing them of hiding messages within this entertainment, but this is utterly ridiculous, considering the protagonist is just like us, and we get to know them at this point, knowing that it is as simple as this: it just wants to watch TV. The humans in the story could be representative of the readers, surprised that Murderbot has this type of human accessibility, making us stop and rethink the negative feelings we possessed towards AI, because there are no necessary negative emotions to hold towards the protagonist.

Claiming to not like humans at all but caring and worrying about the human team, emphasises that Murderbot can display feelings of empathy, and is just stubborn with these feelings due to their species, and the expectation of being murderous. It can be argued that the robot is capable of greater sentiency than other, human, characters in the novella, and the story’s capacity for empathy and understanding through AI highlights that it is more than just computer systems and machines with no emotion. Again here, humanity is expressed through the personality of the protagonist, who is supposed to be this murderous killing machine, but is just an empathetic, stubborn, emotional robot who can resonate with humans.

It is understandable that many writers feel threatened by the notion of AI, but there is no need to. For example, the famous article from The Guardian, ‘A robot wrote this entire article. Are you scared yet, human?’[[8]](#footnote-8) is a brilliant way to scare people away from the concept but was written to convince humans that these ‘robots’ have no negative intentions. The article is written from the first-person perspective of this robot, who states, ‘I know that my brain is not a “feeling brain”. But it is capable of making rational, logical decisions.’[[9]](#footnote-9) And ‘I am to convince as many human beings as possible not to be afraid of me.’[[10]](#footnote-10) if a robot itself is saying this, why are we still weary? Although this article is quite intimidating, it proves that machine learning is nothing to be afraid of or intimidated by. In fact, many companies have used AI successfully, with there being an entire book on this, *How 50 Successful Companies Used AI and Machine Learning to Solve Problems,[[11]](#footnote-11)* by Bernard Marr. The book refers to many huge companies, including ones in retail, media, financial and healthcare services, and of course manufacturing, automotive and aerospace companies. This may be shocking for some people but is proof that AI and the knowledge and power that is possesses can do very big things, including with very large companies, such as AI’s involvement with self-driving cars, and programs such as ChatGPT.

Overall, Martha Wells uses an incredibly clever depiction of the main character to paint a picture of an anthropomorphic representation of AI in the novella. A writer of The Idle Woman blog states that, ‘The most appealing feature is the narration of Murderbot itself: this misanthropic intelligence, created for the sole purpose of security and defence, is just getting rather fed up with the whole thing.’[[12]](#footnote-12) This sums up the story pretty well, in that the main aspect of the story is a figure of artificial intelligence who is supposed to be protective and secure, but just wants to relax, and explore themselves in a society where this isn’t easy. Wells displays the concept of AI as certainly not being a threat, proving that authors who believe this shouldn’t be worried, although it is understandable that some still do and will, due to the sincere number of AI-led projects that are in the world today, and how widespread this concept has become.

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