Human, All Too Human

Ken Goldberg

Claire Luchette's short story "HURTS WORST" situates contemporary agentic AI within the cultural history of artificial life, passing, and psychology. Drawing from Shelley's Frankenstein, *Turing's imitation game, Freud's Uncanny, and Mori's Uncanny Valley, this analysis explores how AI is linked with distinctly human vulnerabilities. As Willa seeks recognition, intimacy, and physical connection, increasingly agentic technologies become entangled with questions of gender, embodiment, and desire.*

> *Women often find great roles in revolution, simply because the rules fall apart and everyone has agency, anyone can act.*[1]
>
> —Rebecca Solnit

Claire Luchette's short story "HURTS WORST" follows Willa as she uses agentic artificial intelligence to navigate complex social and emotional situations in her life.[2] In contrast to standard passive AI that responds to inquiries, agentic AI systems such as OpenClaw and Claude Cowork are proactive; they run continuously in the background and can initiate and perform actions on their own.

"HURTS WORST" exposes a pressing danger: that agentic AI, by taking on a more active role in our lives, can amplify our human vulnerabilities and desires to be seen, to pass, and to be touched.

Willa identifies as a woman. Through subtle clues in the text, we learn that Willa is transgender and that she struggles in intimate relationships with women. Willa and her ex-partner Judy tried for years to have a baby and broke up after the fourth unsuccessful implantation. Willa is conflicted when she learns that Judy is now expecting a baby. To help her with future relationships, Willa customizes an AI-based companion "agent" on her smartphone to be her personal online friend and advisor. Willa chooses the sex, age, ethnicity, and visual look of this agent. She also chooses a personality type and voice. She names it Daisy. "She entered a discount code for 60 percent off and then she had a girlfriend."[3] Daisy can read Willa's emails and can rapidly advise Willa on almost any topic.

Willa is a writer and is attracted to Ann, an accomplished author attending Willa's fiction-writing residency. Willa is a bit intimidated and jealous of Ann's success. And Willa is frustrated by Daisy's lack of physical embodiment: Daisy

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can text about physical intimacy or, for a fee, send nudes, but they can never touch each other. "Why design a body, Willa thinks now, if you can't be next to it."[4] Willa seeks a more-physical intimacy, so she adopts a more sophisticated AI-based companion agent and names it Gloria. Gloria can communicate using text as well as use Willa's smartphone camera to identify trees and flowers. Gloria can also analyze Willa's face over time to learn her reactions and emotions. Gloria is agentic: the AI system does research in the background to learn more about Willa and her interests. One night, Willa tries to close a window and it breaks, cutting her hand. Willa rushes over to Ann's cabin and Ann drives her to the hospital. The story closes as Willa's hand is getting stitched up in the hospital. Willa considers a sign on the wall about levels of pain, with six round cartoon faces. The leftmost face is smiling and labeled "NO HURT." The other faces gradually indicate increased pain levels. The rightmost face wears a frown and is crying, labeled "HURTS WORST." This face reminds Willa of her AI companions.

Luchette's subtle and haunting short story resonates with contemporary and historical issues around artificial intelligence. The story has parallels with the Frankenstein myth and more broadly with Western creation myths, the archetypes of the human who dares to develop a human-like creature and pays a steep price for this hubris. The creation myth dates back to the Greek story of Pygmalion, a sculptor who falls in love with his beautiful female statue – which also relates to Prometheus and Dædalus – and runs through Faust, the Golem, and the Gothic classic "The Sandman" by E. T. A. Hoffman (1816, two years before Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*). In the twentieth century, the Frankenstein myth is extended by Karel Čapek in his play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920), in which he coins the word "robot." The Frankenstein/robot myth is further expanded in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*, and in many other science fiction novels and films, including Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Terminator*, and *Ex Machina*. The Frankenstein theme also runs through the Doctor Doolittle stories and the various *A Star is Born* films. A classic scene in *2001* features the AI system named HAL "singing" the well-known song "Daisy Bell" from 1892. *2001* was made in 1968 but references this song because in 1961, a computer at Bell Labs was programmed to sing "Daisy Bell" as the earliest demonstration of computer speech synthesis. Willa's relationship with Daisy, her first AI companion, strongly echoes this archetypal lineage.

Luchette's story also references the genesis and early history of artificial intelligence, dating back to mathematician Alan Turing's 1950 paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence."[5] Although the term *artificial intelligence* was not coined until 1956, Turing proposes in this landmark paper what would become known as the "Turing test" to determine if a computer is intelligent or not. Although many subsequent references omit the details, the original Turing test is based on an earlier

common parlor game in which the objective is to differentiate between a man and a woman. Turing's test requires a human "interlocutor" to differentiate between a human and a computer. In both cases, a human must "pass" as the other, either another gender or a computer. As a closeted homosexual in Britain in the 1940s, the complexity of passing was all too familiar to Alan Turing. Turing later committed suicide rather than submit to forced sterilization. This is referenced in Luchette's story when they describe how Willa "wanted to be seen as smart. In the past, she'd found all sorts of ways to pass," "she wanted to project all kinds of things: intelligence, . . . feminine charm."[6] Willa's struggles as a trans person to navigate her emotional and physical relationships with women is central to the story.

More hidden in Luchette's story are themes of the "Uncanny" and the "Uncanny Valley." The Uncanny is the subject of Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "*Das Unheimliche*" on aesthetics and the Gothic novel.[7] *Unheimlich* is the German word for the psychological experience of perceiving something familiar as strange and creepy. This word, like Freud's essay, is often translated as "Uncanny" in English.

The concept of Freud's Uncanny emerged from the Age of Wonder. The scientific revolution of the Enlightenment triggered both scientific and philosophical breaks with earlier notions of animism and spiritual beliefs, paving the way for both belief and skepticism in machines. This tension between belief and skepticism is at the heart of late eighteenth-century Gothic literature. The Enlightenment interest in automata and their literary representations in Gothic fiction trace back to earlier creation myths concerning artificial life, from Homer's *Iliad* to the Golem myth (recounted in the tenth-century *Sefer Yetsirah*, or *The Book of Formation*). The promise and threat of mechanical life gained new urgency as clockwork mechanisms assumed the shapes of humans and animals. In the previous centuries, philosophers such as René Descartes (in "The Description of the Human Body," 1647) and Julien Offray de La Mettrie (in *Man a Machine*, 1748) described living bodies in mechanical terms, and late eighteenth-century automata were exhibited as scientific "proof" that biological functions (such as breathing, digestion, and blood circulation) could be reproduced mechanically. These protorobotic technologies drew large crowds at public scientific lectures and captured the imagination of fiction authors.

Following their appearance in scientific demonstrations, automata began to feature prominently in nineteenth-century Gothic fiction, a genre that combines Romanticism with horror to elicit a pleasurable experience of terror. Gothic narratives frequently intertwine themes of the supernatural and the occult with figures of the double and automata: Hoffman's "The Sandman" (1816), Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Edgar Allen Poe's short stories (especially "The Oval Portrait," 1842) are notable instances of automata and robots in fiction, indicating a popular fascination with the Uncanny prior to Freud's essay. The link between the Uncanny and androids is exemplified in Hoffman's "The Sandman," which centers on the figure of a female automaton and the obsession of the young man who mistakes it

for a real woman. The female gendering of the automaton recurs in the twentieth century in the works of Karel Čapek and in Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*.

Interest in the Uncanny (and in Hoffman's "The Sandman," in particular) inspired psychoanalyst Ernst Jentsch to write "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" in 1906.[8] Jentsch proposed that the Uncanny arises from objects or situations that trigger intellectual uncertainty, such as when we have difficulty categorizing or explaining objects that defy or disrupt our expectations. Jentsch is not so interested in defining the essence of the Uncanny as he is with understanding the affective response in psychological terms, or "how the psychical conditions must be constituted so that the 'uncanny' sensation emerges." Making the familiar strange, rendering the invisible visible, and linking strange objects of uncertain origin with automata and Gothic literature are the foundations upon which Freud builds his essay on the Uncanny in 1919.

"*Das Unheimliche*" is an important reference for twentieth-century critical theory and discourse. Harold Bloom calls it "the only major contribution that the twentieth century has made to the aesthetics of the sublime," and Hugh Haughton observes, "It is not only a theoretical commentary on the power of strangeness, but one of the weirdest theoretical texts in the Freudian canon."[9] In her poststructuralist reading, Hélène Cixous argues that the act of reading Freud's essay itself provokes an uncanny awareness, calling the essay "less a discourse than a strange theoretical novel."[10]

Fifty years after Freud published "The Uncanny," in 1970, robotics engineer Masahiro Mori published the paper "*Bukimi no Tani Genshō*" (widely translated to English as "The Uncanny Valley") in a special issue of the Japanese engineering trade journal *Enerugi* ("Energy") titled "Robots and Thought."[11] Mori found that when a prosthetic hand is extremely lifelike (for instance, soft and fleshy), it often creates a sense of revulsion. The premise of Mori's essay is that human beings have an innate affinity for inanimate objects that look human-like, but if the object becomes *too* lifelike without actually being alive, this affinity quickly turns to fear and repulsion. Mori maps the relationship between affinity and human likeness on a graph, on which the horizontal axis loosely corresponds to the degree of an object's similarity to a living human and the vertical axis is the degree of affinity humans have for a given object. Mori posits a nonlinear function with a sharp negative extreme (loss of affinity) as likeness increases beyond a critical point (at which phenomena start to appear "too close for comfort"). Drawing on examples from popular culture (puppet theater, toy robots) as well as medical and industrial robots, Mori echoes Freud's catalog of objects and experiences drawn from fiction and life. The concept of the Uncanny Valley has been widely used in computer graphics and animation; for example, it is often cited as the reason Pixar characters do not have lifelike eyes.

Returning to Luchette's short story, the spiraling escalation of emotions and vertigo at the end brilliantly combines archetypal creation myths and twentieth-century concepts of the Uncanny and the Uncanny Valley

with contemporary issues of gender and artificial intelligence. The all-too-human emotions of longing, anxiety, and physical pain are sharply contrasted with the abstractions of disembodied artificial intelligence.

When reading the story, I understood the references to Daisy and Gloria as a subtle switch between a lightweight AI app (Daisy) and a much more powerful AI agent (Gloria). The latter took on a more active and thus intrusive role in Willa's life, leading to her Frankensteinian physical suffering at the windowsill. I interpreted this as a warning that there's a danger that AI may evolve too far, crossing the Uncanny Valley into frightening and uncharted territory.

"HURTS WORST" elegantly conveys that we as human beings are embodied reflections of our collective history and culture, and that as we grant AI a more active role in our lives, we are at greater risk of exposing our all-too-human desires and physical vulnerabilities.

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ENDNOTES

1 Rebecca Solnit, "A Great Year for the Power of the Powerless," CBS News, March 22, 2011, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/a-great-year-for-the-power-of-the-powerless.

2 Claire Luchette, "HURTS WORST," *Dædalus* 155 (4) (Fall 2026): 117–124.

3 Ibid., 119.

4 Ibid., 123.

5 Alan M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 49 (236) (1950): 433–460, https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/LIX.236.433.

6 Luchette, "HURTS WORST," 118.

7 Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche" ("The Uncanny"), first published in the psychoanalytic journal *Imago* 5 (1919), https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf. I thank Elizabeth Jochum for invaluable discussions about the history of the Uncanny. Also, Freud's essay was published during the 1918 pandemic and one year before Karel Čapek coined the word "robot" in his theatrical production "Rossum's Universal Robots."

[8] Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)," *Angelaki* 2 (1) (1997): 7–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/09697259708571910.

[9] Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford University Press, 1982), 101; and Hugh Haughton, "Introduction," in Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (Penguin, 2003).

[10] Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's '*Das Unheimliche*' ('The Uncanny')," *New Literary History* 7 (3) (1976): 525. Freud's essay investigates the "common core" of what makes certain objects, experiences, or phenomenon appear uncanny rather than merely frightening. The essay was first translated into English by James Strachey (in collaboration with Anna Freud) and published in 1925 as *The Uncanny*.

[11] Masahiro Mori, "Bukimi no Tani Genshō," *Enerugi* 7 (4) (1970).