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The Perversion of the System

You are not a father to your son, a dear friend to your homie, and certainly not a respected figure in your community; rather, you are just another node in this massive network made up of billions of other human nodes. Eileen Gunn's "Computer Friendly", carrying strong posthuman overtones, is an allegory of the totalitarianism observed in this world. Each character in the story is a node and a function within the massive system, which represents the totalitarian regime or elitism in real life. The main plot, which is the elimination of Sheena, symbolizes the total control of ideologies and the makeup of society desired by those who control it. In an elitism-infused, goal-driven, inhumane society, resistance remains, which is symbolized by the efforts put in by the protagonist Elizabeth and her helpers to save Sheena. Gunn's "Computer Friendly" functions as an allegory to the way the elites and the governments try to impose total control on the mass majority, instilling values and desirable traits into them while eliminating undesirable traits and resistance.

The beginning of the story demonstrates the core context and premise of this story: the computer is the new king. Elizabeth's father told the query box that Elizabeth is "computer-friendly". Such an action symbolizes an act of subordination or, at least, a courtesy specifically directed toward the computer. Within the story, this action sets the posthuman overtone where robots and humans share the same or even unequal status because of the courtesy given. By saying that Elizabeth is computer-friendly, her father expresses that she will not cause any troubles and will fully cooperate. It applies to the real world as well. The computer can be thought of as an authoritative figure or organization in control. On the

other hand, Elizabeth's father symbolizes the mass majority who are controlled by these authorities. Regardless of whether we are conscious or deliberate, we tend to exhibit certain forms of submission to the authorities, whether it be paying the taxes, respecting a boss who is all-around disrespectful, condescending, or abiding by the rules and norms imposed by the authorities. The authorities set the rules and devise a system required for everyone to participate in. In order to survive, playing by the rules is essential.

In a world replete with elitism, only things that are deemed desirable can survive. As Elizabeth and the other kids in the test room were led by the monitors to perform jumping jacks, it shows that monitors try to facilitate their health to a certain extent. Monitors' action embraces elitism and is done based on what they desire. The same action can be seen later on when the robots try to eliminate Sheena by having her go to the euthanasia center because Sheena is an undesirable component to the system, despite the fact that Sheena is a living being whose inherent worth and dignity are supposed to be acknowledged. Interestingly, not only does the system proactively try to eliminate the undesirable component, it also seeks to assess what traits are desirable and instill them into its followers. For instance, Elizabeth's test score indicates her strengths and weaknesses. After the test score was returned to her parents, her father made comments appraising her low physical aptitude scores: "And her physical aptitude scores are even lower than Bobby's" and wanting to reduce her socialization score: "Maybe they should reduce her class time to twice a month" (Wesleyan: 645). All these expectations stem from a sole goal: having Elizabeth become a netexec. It demonstrates how elites and social norms, just like the system, instill values and beliefs into us in a way that we reproduce them, passing them down to the next generation.

The elitism and the massive system collectively reduce everyone to a simple function and a component, despite the fact that we are really much more than that. Each of us can be a dearly loved one to somebody, the most heroic figure to someone, and everything to someone

else's world, but we are just another component in the system. Notably, our function could differ because of the influence we receive. For instance, Elizabeth's mother is a processing center that has high levels of authority and access allowing her to talk directly to the CPU, whereas those low in hierarchy do not have this level of access. Nonetheless, with everything being equal, everyone is just another component, which can be inferred from the fact that Elizabeth's father tells her that she may not have time to call him and her mother once she becomes an important figure/function. The system and our jobs are so dehumanizing that we do not get to maintain our basic needs because of being caught up in tasks and demands from our job. However, it is the intimate connections between us and our loved ones that often keep us going and make us human, so to speak. The very fact that Elizabeth's father allows for such a possibility with full willingness exemplifies how the system reduces everyone to a function, a function or a node devoid of emotions or forced to rid of emotions. Emotions are meaningless in this productive, highly functional, elite society. Such phenomena are prevalent in our society. Workers get paid not only to invest in physical and mental labor, they are required to invest emotional labor in the job, which is the notion that we suppress our true feelings and emotions in order to remain professional and conforming to societal standards and expectation (Jeung et al.), though emotional labor is oftentimes not a visible term of our employment contract.

The more functional, productive, and technological the world progresses to, the more we are interconnected with the main agendas and influences that the elitism or social trends impose and exert on us. Elizabeth has her input and output; Elizabeth's mother speaks through a console and is directly connected to the CPU; Brownie's (the family's dog) brain is used to simulate trajectory curves. Everything is connected to the system that then exploits everything for the so-called greater good. If this is not enough, also be aware that monitor robots take everyone's fingerprints at the test center when certain incidents happen (e.g,

when Sheena tried to use the sweater as a stopper in the sink and when Sheena spit onto the wall). If this is not enough, realize that Norton and Chickenheart always remembered to wipe the memory after they did things that can be left traces of and are against the system. In the real world, we are constantly on our phones, browsing various platforms and apps, all of which collect our personal information and utilize algorithms to make arrangements for us, just like the system arranging the euthanasia center for Sheena. We are connected to the system in every way, physically, ideologically; this connection influences us in every way in turn, affecting what we think. At the same time, the system knows exactly who we are, and this identity transparency can be used in the favor of the system to hold us accountable for actions that are not morally wrong but just against what the system wants.

So far, the essay adopted an almost cynical view, criticizing the very foundation of this system. However, it is also worth noting that a posthuman society wherein dependence on technologies abounds is not always in variance with positivity. It is through the intricate network and algorithms and built-in mechanisms of characters including Elizabeth, Norton, Brownie, and Chickenheart that resistance gains momentum. For example, Elizabeth can utilize her programming and connection to other nodes to access databases to attain information that facilitates her effort of saving Sheena. Although it remains unknown whether Sheena was saved eventually, Elizabeth being able to acquire information of Sheena through connecting to the sysop and Norton, who then helped to find Chickenheart, the original super-cortex, demonstrates the convenience brought by the development of the system. While the system itself is totalitarian and dehumanizing, how we live under this regime also comes down to how everyone operates individually. Beings such as Elizabeth and 'nodes' such as Norton and Chickenheart are quintessential representations of the rebel to the system. They are willing to take risks to do the things that they think are righteous. These rebellious efforts under a totalitarian regime endowed the story a romantic hue. It is

heartwarming to see such acts of faith and kindness, especially in a posthuman world controlled by the system.

The system, however, may not always have started with ill-intentioned agendas and goals. “The Chickenheart’s where the system began” (Wesleyan: 650), which, combined with the Chickenheart’s help to save Sheena, indicates that the system did not start out as a totalitarian regime. As the network develops and becomes increasingly complex, the management becomes an issue, as Norton told Elizabeth: “But didn’t I tell you the Chickenheart’s been around for a while? You know what that means? It means you got yer intermittents, you got yer problems with feedback, runaway processes, what have you” (Wesleyan: 650). Clearly the system has deviated from its original goal and intention represented by Chickenheart, a compassionate super cortex. Such a deviation is observed in our society as well, in which all political parties tend to degenerate due to abuses of power, centralization, and emergence of oppositions (Roe-Crimes).

As the saying goes, absolute power corrupts absolutely. As every empire and society develops, it also collapses eventually, the undeniably omnipresent pattern (Vakulenko). But before that, the system will continue striving to remain in control, no matter how much it is in control already. Chickenheart said: “They say they’re optimizing for predictability. It’s a mistake, sir, let me tell you. Things are too predictable here already” (Wesleyan: 652). Aside from the irony that the system is improving on predictability in a world that is too predictable, the statement shows how insatiable the system is in remaining in control, so much so that a single undesirable component such as Sheena was not to be tolerated.

In summary, Gunn’s “Computer Friendly” utilizes a posthuman, computer-controlled world to illustrate the pervasive, degenerative trajectory of our political parties and elite class and how the political parties are often obsessed about remaining in total control. The total control is forced upon the mass majority, who are reduced to a simple node or function in a

highly productive society, with the individuals less desired by the system having difficulty surviving and the fittest attaining upper positions in the society.

Works Cited

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