

Jennifer Brown

Prof. Cathy Herweyer

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Thinking Differently about “Good News from the Vatican”



Flying over St. Peters--like the robot Pope

For this week's essay, I really wanted to write about what really happened in “As Simple As That,” or about time paradoxes in “Lollipop and the Tar Baby,” but it was the story I liked the least: Robert Silverberg's “Good News from the Vatican” that ended up nagging at me to write about it. I think because out of everything that we have read so far in class this is the story that changed my perspective, and in the end really produced a delicious “a-ha!” moment.

When I first read this story, I assumed that Silverberg was making a mockery of the Catholic process for electing a Pope. I assumed the story was stating that the Catholic Church's rituals, processes and beliefs were so mechanized that a programmed machine would make a better leader than a man--to see it used in a story was offensive.

On second reading, though, and especially after the class discussion, I saw this story in a completely different light. Science fiction stories often act as parables. Science fiction can tackle an otherwise taboo issue, because the safety of a fictional world removes the issues of blame and finger pointing, which will only muddy the story. “Good News from the Vatican,” on second look, is one of these parables—a story that is making a statement about our own society.

This story is a parable about acceptance—a lesson in looking beyond surface differences to see that at the core there are very few differences. Several of the less accepting characters, like Kenneth, say such things as, “[t]hey’re all alike,” when referring to robots in general. Miss Harshaw points out that a robot is “not a man.” The same statements mirror statements made by segregationists. Later in the story, robots are also referred to as “people of synthetic origin.” This statement implies that robots have moved well beyond being programmed mechanized machines, and into the realm of artificial intelligence—or the ability to have free will, and in many ways that is what a soul is.

So for me, this story was a wake-up call. Firstly, not to be so defensive about my religion, it is worthy of mockery at times, especially because we can be so stuffy. Likewise, the story made an interesting statement about the openness of religion—it is the first place to embrace those that are different. The Catholic Church comprises of people from all over the world, before the Civil War whites and Blacks often worshipped in the same churches together. Some churches today are breaking ground by accepting homosexual, which like the robots in the story, is a first step to bridge the gaps in our differences. Finally, this story really displayed the heart of science fiction—applying the story to the real world can offer deep insights into both the good and bad of our world, and teach us lessons we didn’t even know we needed to learn.