

## ***Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?***

Philip K. Dick's landmark science fiction novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, follows bounty hunter Rick Deckard as he hunts down androids and dreams of owning a real, live sheep. The basis for the critically-acclaimed film *Blade Runner*, this novel explores some of science fiction's most timeless questions: what makes us human? What could the unforeseen consequences of our technology be? In our relationship with technology, who is the master and who is the slave?

These three activities will help students:

- Consider what defines us as humans and explore the concept of empathy both through literature and history
- Do a close reading of the text, including original ideas and terms first defined by Dick
- Look at a range of allusions within the text, including religious, artistic, and literary figures

### **Activity 1**

#### **What is it to be Human?**

In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) the fundamental quality associated with being human is translated into the ability to feel empathy. That is what distinguishes humans from androids (called replicants in *Blade Runner*, the film version of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*).

Consider some definitions of what it means to be human.

For Blaise Pascal in the 17th century, it is man's ability to reason; "*Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed.*"

For Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the 19th century, it is man's ability to be irrational, to insist that 2+2 may equal 5. See *Notes From Underground*.

For Mark Twain, it is the ability to feel shame. "Man is the only animal that blushes - or needs to."

For the writers of *Star Trek* in the 20th century, it is man's ability to feel emotion (Captain Kirk) and not to be dominated by cold reason alone (the Vulcan, Mr. Spock).

Look at the experiment on the spider in chapter 18 of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Consider the lack of empathy in the androids (Irmgard Baty, Pris Stratton, Roy Baty) as they cut off four of the spider's eight legs ("it doesn't need all those legs") and then light a match and hold it close to spider to force it to walk. Despite the fact that John Isidore is mentally feeble (a "chickenhead"), he feels for the plight of the spider ("Don't mutilate it," he said wheezingly. Imploringly.) He euthanizes the spider by drowning it. Notice the indifference of the androids: "Pris clipped off another leg, restraining the spider with the edge of her hand. She was smiling."

Is the android's dissection of the spider cruel or just scientific? (It does posit a hypothesis and then it tests that hypothesis.)

Is Dick right? Is empathy the distinguishing quality of human beings?

- Which do *you* think is the essential quality of human beings?
- What distinguishes us from animals?
- What distinguishes us from robots?
- Can a human being himself or herself be “inhuman”? If so, what might make someone inhuman?

This chapter is the key chapter in helping readers understand the essential difference between androids and humans. It is a complicated chapter though because it also has a religious dimension and connects empathy to Mercerism (i.e. Christianity) and to the mystical fusion experience. It also reveals that Buster Friendly is an android, Mercer is a fake, “Mercerism is a swindle,” suggests that the “cult of Mercer” will survive, references the “dry bones” passage in Ezekiel 37 (“*The bones, he realized, have reversed themselves*”), has John Isidore descend to the “tomb world” and meet Mercer (really “an elderly retired bit player named Al Jarry”) who resurrects the drowned spider and restores its legs. That’s typical of this novel—it is overflowing with ideas. Not all of the ideas, however, are clearly elaborated or coherently related. That may be because this book was written at lightning speed (Dick, for example, wrote twelve novels between 1963 and 1964) and doesn’t conventionally reward the kind of scrutiny and close reading that others novel sometimes provide.

It’s important to make clear to students the richness of this text while, at the same time, alerting them to the book’s contradictory ambiguities (e.g. the negative and the positive dimension/depiction of androids; the confused symbolism of chapter 21 in which Deckard fuses “permanently” with Mercer, becomes Mercer; the nullifying epiphany in the last chapter of Deckard saying, “The spider Mercer gave the chickenhead, Isidore; it probably was artificial too. But it doesn’t matter. The electric things have their lives too.”).

### Digging Deeper

- Consider lack of empathy (“fellow feeling,” ability to feel another’s pain…) in regard to using humans as test subjects:
  - Nazi experiments on human beings (e.g. Dr. Josef Mengele’s experiments on twins) <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007060>
  - The Tuskegee syphilis experiment <http://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/index.html>
  - Using animals for testing for cosmetics, perfumes, and biomedical research ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal\\_testing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_testing))
- Compare the idea of empathy in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Atticus to Scout: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”) with the idea of empathy as presented in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Look at the way Harper Lee develops the idea of empathy in the narrative of her novel (particularly in reference to Boo Radley but not just him) with the way the empathy theme plays out in the narrative of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*
- Read Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* and consider *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the actions in the novel through the lens of “I/It” and “I/Thou” relationships.
- Look at mystical writers like Meister Eckhart and Emanuel Swedenborg and compare their idea of union with the Godhead with the idea of “fusion” with Mercer in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

### Activity 2

#### Universal Principles Operating Throughout the Universe

In chapter 6 of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, John Isidore, the chickenhead, discusses kipple (“useless objects”) with Pris Stratton. He defines kipple and tells her that the First Law of Kipple states, “Kipple drives out nonkipple.”

Consider extensions of this idea in the text.

Do false animals drive out real animals?

(Collect evidence from the novel regarding real animals vs. electric ones. Look particularly at the electric toad at the end of the novel (notice its significant position in the novel!) and Iran ordering “artificial flies” to feed it because “I want it to work perfectly. My husband is devoted to it.”)

Do false humans (androids) drive out real humans? (Is Richard Deckerd possibly an android himself as the director’s cut of *Blade Runner* suggests?) What details in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (consider, for comparison, the characters of Rachel Rosen and Phil Resch, for example) also point to or point away from this conclusion?

NB: Philip K. Dick: “I’m the first person to invent an android who doesn’t know he’s an android.”

Consider also Isidore’s statement, “No one can win against kipple....It’s a universal principle operating throughout the universe: the entire universe is moving toward a state of total, absolute kippleization” (65-66).

What is the modern equivalent of kipple? Is our world subject to “kippleization” too?

Are there modern equivalents to the kinds of futuristic devices pictured in this novel? The mood organ? The empathy box? The vid phone? The hover car? Others?

### **Digging Deeper**

Compare Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* with *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Look, for example, at the idea of “soma” in Huxley’s novel and compare it with the mood organ in Dick’s novel.

### **Activity 3**

#### **Odd Allusions in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?***

Allusions in works of literature typically provide a dimension to help illumine a work. For example, the allusions to Renaissance writers in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* suggest a world of order and provide a counterpoint to the fragmented modern world pictured in the poem.

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* there are a number of references to religious, artistic, and literary figures but the way in which they function in the novel is rarely traditional.

There are direct references to modern artists like Pablo Picasso and works like Edvard Munch’s “The Scream.” Why those artists? How do those references function in this novel?

There is a reference to [Al Jarry](#), the man behind Buster Friendly. Is this a reference to the author of *Ubu Roi*, the French avant-garde playwright and writer Alfred Jarry? Why or why not?

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred\\_Jarry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Jarry)

The chapter in which John Isidore finds a spider also contains a discussion of the exposure of Mercerism (i.e. Christianity.) Is that a reference to Ingmar Bergman’s 1961 film *Through a Glass Darkly* in which a spider is also associated with God? Does the events in chapter 18 refer back to Jonathan Edward’s 1741 sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in which he envisions God holds man over “the pit of Hell” “much as one holds a spider...over the fire”? How does one determine whether something is a literary allusion, merely a reference, or a non-significant coincidence?

What of the appearance in chapter 21 of the phrase “Dr. Johnson snuff”? People in the 18th century did take snuff, but there are no references in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* to Samuel Johnson himself taking snuff. Footnotes in that work refer to Johnson as wearing a “snuff colored coat” and mention Johnson giving snuff boxes as presents to Mrs. Thrale and Sir Joshua Reynolds. Perhaps when Rick Deckerd inhales “Dr. Johnson snuff,” he inhales the qualities of Johnson himself—sensibleness, rationality, morality. Is that true? Is there any evidence in the text to support this hypothesis?

The character of the android Rachel Rosen murders Deckerd’s real goat by pushing it off a roof. Why? Revenge? Or is the act ham fistedly symbolic, an allusion to the literal scapegoat of the Old Testament? The name Rachel means “lamb” in Biblical Hebrew. Is she, though an android, the lamb of God? Rachel wears a fish scale coat—another religious reference? Perhaps. But is the reference to Jesus as a fisher of men or to Apollyon of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* who is part fish scales?

Not only is the scapegoat allusion simultaneously suggestive and indefinite, but also its connection with the events of the novel is likewise unclear.

The consequences of Rachel Rosen’s action (the death of Deckerd’s goat) is that his wife Iran becomes empathetic to her husband for the first time in the novel (compare the ending and opening scenes) when she tells him of the death of the animal. The novel moves toward a domestic conclusion (the last word of the novel is “coffee”) in which the wife ministers to her exhausted husband (and his electric toad) who no longer needs the mood organ to sleep. How do we understand this ending?

Are androids like Rachel Rosen evil or good? Or are they like the character of Mephistopheles in Goethe’s *Faust*.

Faust: "Who art thou--then?"

Mephistopheles: "Part of that power which eternally wills evil and yet creates the good."

Is Deckerd a man or an android that is so humanlike he doesn’t even know he is an android? Is that what the title of the novel suggests since he no longer has his real sheep—just an electric toad?