No Layers
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The office worker refuses to think otherwise. He thinks that every day will be exciting, filled with new discoveries, new ideas which could change the business world. The daily workload does not seem to face him yet. The reality of this situation doesn’t automatically reveal itself, the reality that every day will be almost identical to the last. Sign-in, take the elevator to the thirty seventh floor, sit down in a jail cell office and begin to click on the keyboard until the clock strikes twelve. The plight of the worker is represented in many works of literature. In particular, both “A&P” by John Updike and “Night Waitress” by Lynda Hall depict the plight of the worker. Repetitive and routine jobs trap the characters, blocking out any creative aspect in them and eventually transforming them into “automatic” work machines.

Repetitive and routine jobs such as being a sales clerk, office worker or even waitress break down spontaneity in humans and their layers of “self.” The jobs which require a person to do the same thing every day create an unexciting pattern which the individual gets used to overtime. Such patterns create no new stimuli for the brain, slowing down the creative process that fuels spontaneity. In Lynda Hull’s “Night Waitress,” every day becomes predictable and every moment on the job shows the waitress she is repeating her mother’s fate: “I’m telling myself my face has character / not beauty. It’s my mother’s Slavic face / she washed the floor on hands and knees” (Hull 3-5). Every night for this waitress is almost identical to the last and she sees herself doing the same type of work as her mother. She repeats the role of a servant and at
some point it is clearly unbearable to “re-live” each day and experience the same situations over and over. The dangers of a repetitive type of job carry into other aspects of a person’s life. When a person is uninspired in the workplace, that lack of mystery and excitement is carried over when they return home. They can walk into their house and never notice the fresh flowers or the new furniture. They can even walk right past exciting opportunities as their daily routine at work, did not challenge them to face abstract ideas. Consequently as Christopher Clausen argues in Against Work, “it could even be argued that the most highly prized pleasures have themselves become a form of work, complete with their own uniforms, disciplines, and special lingo” (Clausen 135). What this means is that things which provide working people with happiness can become “routine.” Vacations can begin to be taken on as separate “job tasks” requiring routine planning and rules among other things. In the simplest terms, the repetitive, uninspiring job which the person has adapted to takes over their entire life and turns any exciting or abstract ideas or places into jail like cells.

Like the waitress in “Night Waitress, Sammy too finds his job unfulfilling because of the routine he performs. Standing and checking items at the cash register strains his mind and forces it to “entertain” itself. When work gets excessively repetitive, his mind works out a system, for example on Thursday when “the store's pretty empty…there [is] nothing much to do except lean on the register and wait for the girls to show up again” (Updike 126). At first glance there does not seem to be a problem; however this reinforces the idea that the job performed is mentally dissatisfying. At this point Sammy’s own mind fools him into continuing the less than “satisfactory” work.

In Lynda Hull’s “Night Waitress,” the waitress loses the interactions of humans as her repetitive work takes control. While someone like a waitress works the typical nine to five shift
or even a night shift, nothing changes. Each day becomes unbearable as it brings identical
scenes; nevertheless the mind hopes for changes. As the days pass, that hope diminishes and
reality sets in as “the calendar / …predicts no disaster / only another white square waiting / to be
filled like the desire that fills / jail cells” (Hull 32-36). Her days predict no disaster because the
calendar shows the same thing over and over. The night waitress has nothing to look forward to.
The squares on the calendar are “jail cells” that keep her in the box until the next day. Having
nothing new to look forward to breaks down the essence of what it means to be human and the
battle is lost. The night waitress describes it perfectly when her shift ends and she says, “I’m
fading/ in the morning’s insinuations/…in every fault of this frail machinery” (Hull 45-49). It is
as if she becomes a plain back-drop to the rest of the moving, living world. She becomes just a
piece of the robotic machinery, made for one task, each day dedicated to the same purpose. The
calendar days have no layers of mystery, no surprise; therefore she, along with many other
workers who face the same work environment, are mentally “weak,” driven-down parts of a
meaningless machinery.

As depicted in “Night Waitress,” the aftermath of working a constraining job changes the
characters into robots only interested in interactions with machines. Once the repetition has taken
over the once creative, independent mind, the person tends to lose part of what makes them
human. The complete transformation can be noticed when the working person cannot appreciate
their outside surroundings. In other words, when the singing of birds, becomes an annoying noise
or even the shapes of the clouds become nothing but smoke-like fumes. In the poem the “Night
Waitress,” the character fulfills the entire transformation when she says, “When I walk out of
here in the morning/ my mouth is bitter with sleeplessness” (Hull 39-40). What this means is that
she does not pay attention to anything around her. Everything around her has lost its beauty or
even meaning. Like a robotic figure, she cannot appreciate the morning as a burst of life, a shining sun which marks a new day. She can only focus on how tired she is, run down like a machine that has been performing the same task for too long and cannot notice the natural beauty of the morning, it’s mystery, the layers of bursting life. The night waitress is not the only character who fails to notice her surroundings. As she brings silverware to her customers she notices that, “they do not see me...There’s the man / who leans over the jukebox nightly / pressing the combinations / of numbers. I would not stop him / if he touched me, but it’s only songs / of risky love he leans into.” (Hull 12-18). The man interacts only with the jukebox, he has lost a sense of reality and the machine is his only concern. As he interacts with the machine he becomes sucked into its endless combinations of numbers. As the man is consumed by the jukebox, this interaction seems to be the only significant one.

As the routine job takes over and transforms a person into a robot-like machine, human thought process along with unexpected movements vanish. In the story, “A & P,” even Sammy’s friend transforms into a robot whenever he asks “Is it done?”… [as] the responsible married man finding his voice..” (Updike 128). Instead of having normal conversation, Sammy’s friend asks work related question. It’s as if his only task is to make sure things are in order and done. There are no smiles and casual conversation. This idea of compromising what it means to be human is best described when Sammy quits his sales clerk job and forces his robotic boss to take over. Sammy describes the movement and appearance of his boss when he says, “I could see Lengel in my place in the slot... his face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of iron” (Updike 131). In other words, Lengel was not seen as a human anymore but more so as a piece of machinery, working with inhumane movements, more so like a “programmed” robot, taught only to ring up the items, follow steps one through three and then repeat. All this while
patiently waiting for his meaningless reward, meaningless in a sense that it probably does not provide the human mind with the opportunity to explore new abstract ideas Sammy slightly transitions into the robotic stage when he checks the items at the register and he notices that, “…after you do it often enough, it begins to make a little song, that you hear words to…‘Hello (bing) there, you (gung) hap-py pee-pul (splat)’-the splat being the drawer flying out” (Updike 130/131). In other words Sammy cannot take the amount of routine which comes with the job and creates his own unique stimulus. Somewhat similar to Lengel, Sammy’s interaction with humans is mediated by a machine. Fortunately, as Sammy leaves the supermarket and quits his job he chooses his individuality and humanity over the unsatisfying life of a human robot.

Unlike Sammy, the unnamed Night Waitress remains in anonymous automaton. The night waitress transforms and becomes one with the machines and industrial surroundings. The transformation is complete as she sees:

Men surge to the factories and I’m too tired
to look. Fingers grip lunch box handles,
belt buckles gleam, wind riffles my uniform
and it’s not romantic when the sun unlids
the end of the avenue. I’m fading
in the morning’s insinuations
collecting in the crevices of the building,
in wrinkles, in every fault
of this frail machinery. (Hull 41-49)

She has faded completely and blended into the emotionless world around her. The metals around her make sounds that she hears, yet does not mention the bird’s morning chirps. She only
recognizes the superficial machine-like sounds. Unlike Sammy who breaks free from the torturous cycle, the night waitress returns to her jail cell, awaiting another identical day.

Once a repetitive job consumes an individual, it changes who they are, how they perceive the world as well as the way in which the world perceives them. If people keep fooling themselves, believing that the routine job does not consume them, one day they might find themselves surrounded by robots. Perhaps the office worker cannot realize that he has exchanged his human identity simply because the change was made undetectable by his own brain which adapted to the “dull” blank calendar. Unless he sees the “sunlight” which the night waitress overlooked, he will be stuck in the office box, only to be temporarily relieved by the twelve o’clock lunch break.
Works Cited


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