

The Pain Gods

Jennifer O'Connor

National University of Ireland, Galway¹

Abstract. The short story entitled “The Pain Gods” defines a future where the protagonist designs a set of contact lenses which hold the ability to allow someone to revisit their fondest memories. Present also in this futuristic world are the Pain Gods, robotic-like figures who run all government buildings and organisations. The story encapsulates the human instinct for love in direct comparison to the Pain God’s desire for innovation above all else. The story describes a future in which emotion-driven human enterprise processes may become misused in order for the mass creation of personified products.

Keywords. Singularity, robotics, dementia, Human-Technology Interaction (HTI), innovation, Artificial Intelligence, futurecasting, semiotics.

Introduction

The short story “The Pain Gods” describes the life of a middle-aged man who has suffered a severe loss. From the offset, the premise of the story is not far-fetched. The protagonist showcases his desperation to regain what he has lost by using his extreme intellect to design a set of contact lenses. However, the protagonist lives in a futuristic world which ought to be avoided as nowadays technology advances rapidly. In this science fiction prototype, Artificial Intelligence has advanced dramatically and the emotion-driven production of products for human use is now manipulated and exploited. In describing the singularity and intelligences of the Pain Gods, which has only mounted in recent years, the importance of developing such prototypes for the purposes of easing human suffering can be clearly seen, as one must always be in touch with the raw human emotions of any situation.

“The Pain Gods” is a dystopian story inspired both by what technology-developing humans ought to avoid and by the image of what will be important to humans in a future where the worlds technological ventures surpass what is now imaginable. These advances are achieved by a moment in time when artificial intelligence becomes so

¹

Creative Writing Department, National University of Ireland, Galway. Email: jgvtoc@hotmail.com.

advanced that humanity's intelligence was changed irrevocably. The contact lenses themselves function on a basis of manipulation of human's natural hormone secretions and electro-chemical responses in order to trigger memory. The premise for this story is for the creation of a reprieve which would be offered by the ability to relive one's happiest memories. This story is simply one example of human genius to create excellence which becomes demoralised over time by Artificial Intelligence. The story is written with the background knowledge of a writer, rather than a technologist. This is showcased through the character development of the protagonist and the deterioration of his mental health in correlation with the development of the contact lenses. It is the protagonist's passion for creating an entirely new product for the human race which is replicated by those technologists involved in creating new product prototypes. Rendering to the principles which all science fiction prototypes [1] are built upon, technologists and writers combined hold an ability to look far further than the restraints of current technology. Baring this in mind, this story serves the purpose to widen the perception of current technological accomplishments and encourages the design of products from a place of intense emotion in order to create personified products for great all-round benefit whilst remaining cautious of what may happen should the human race lose its control over emotion-based produce.

1. The Pain Gods

The day had started off badly for Ivan Lightwood. By the time he reached his desk, he was glowering darkly. He ignored the greetings of the holographic receptionist at the front door of his office and stuck his thumb into the slot by the door of the elevator and waited for it to read his fingerprint with an impatient frown. He scanned his irises four times on his journey to the twentieth floor as he did every day. Today, however, the building's tight security was just an additional annoyance to Ivan. He felt a distinct hatred for his robotic bosses which ran both his company and the entirety of London infrastructure. They were called the Pain Gods because they were all-seeing with their invasive technology. It had been some years since they had taken over the worldwide pharmaceutical industry and the price of pain medications had risen astronomically. Yet there was no argument to be made against them, Ivan knew. Who would he tell? Their unnerving metal bodies with seamless movements and immeasurable strength were in every courtroom, classroom, doctor's office and even in the House of Commons. Yet today there were several reasons for his bad mood, and least of which was the chronic pain which throbbed as terrible as always throughout his long limbs, bone deep and pulsating. For once the Pain Gods were far from Ivan's mind.

Once he was out of sight of the other human workers in his building in his large office, he chewed on his lip sourly looking out over the London skyline. There was only a handful of humans with professions left in the city, as the Pain Gods had become more ingenious by the day. He was lucky. But today Ivan felt anything but lucky. They would be watching from their 4D security cameras and they would expect to see him working. However, Ivan couldn't focus as thoughts of Rose filled his mind and he thought back to this morning.

When the chip the Pain Gods had given him in his arm pulsed painfully, Ivan woke. It was half-past six in the morning he had become instantly aware of the palpable pain in his neck and back. Perhaps he was aware even in his sleep. Since the Pain Gods in the World Health Organisation had restricted the use of opiate and codeine based

drugs, sleep had been harder to find. The pain seemed to seep into every cell and fester like a bacteria, gathering strength and power that he could not contend with. He was only able to look past the pain when he felt the empty space in the bed next to him. It was still warm, but when he opened his eyes he could not see Rose anywhere. Standing, he drew his dressing gown around him and pattered out onto the hall landing.

"Rose?" He asked the darkness. There was no reply but the indents in the plush carpet on the stair's landing revealed footprints leading to the bathroom. He found Rose packing her toiletries into a small bag with great haste. She grew pale when she saw him.

"What are you doing?" Ivan asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. It was a foolish question. Rose bit her lip but did not stop packing. She was a true life Snow White with her thick black hair and red lips. It was something that Ivan had loved about her when they first met in university some five years ago. Ivan had already agreed for the Pain Gods to fund his education, in exchange for his labour once he graduated university.

"I'm leaving, Ivan." When she said his name her voice was icy.

"You can't." He said hollowly. She zipped up the small bag and walked around him swiftly into the spare bedroom. Her shoulders were shaking but she kept her head held high. Ivan followed her as though in a great daze. Fear was beginning to stir inside him like some insidious monster.

Two suitcases were waiting in the spare bedroom.

"Why?" Ivan thought his voice seemed to echo curiously as the word reverberated around his head over and over again.

"You're never here, Ivan. You work too much and I need help with mum, but you just don't care." She snapped, tucking her toiletry bag inside the top of one of the suitcases. "My dad is outside. I'm moving back home."

This was not surprising to Ivan. What was surprising however was that she did not think he understood the importance of her mother's situation. He opened his mouth to argue, but a knock on the door downstairs made his stomach drop. Rose moved downstairs to open the door and her father followed her back upstairs. George was a balding man with a vast expanse of stomach. His cheeks turned rosy as he clambered up the stairs. George was a man of few words and merely awarded Ivan with a rough grunt. He felt particularly helpless in that moment as he stood to grasp the bannister of the stairs, watching them leave. He made no move to stop her. He only watched as Rose touched the handle of the front door with their cat, Puffer under her arm. He had been named so as he irritated Rose's asthma so badly that her inhaler was never far from grasp. Yet even then, she had loved him terribly.

"Rose?" Ivan was ashamed at the quiver in his voice. He was hideously weak and perhaps that is why she was leaving.

"What?" She sounded weary now, all anger forgotten.

"Good luck with Amelia." The words were a mistake. At the reminder for Rose of her dementia-ridden mother, her face turned dark and the door slammed.

Thus had been the reason for his foul mood as he entered the office building. He had not even considered taking a day off work. The Pain Gods issued each employee with a mere six-day stamp card at the beginning of each year. The stamps were impossible to forge, and there was no hope of getting more.

Usually, he looked upon his job as a place of privilege – the Pain Gods did not pick just anyone – but today it felt troublesome to meet their IQ standard of one hundred and seventy. All humans below that were thought of as unreliable. He sat at his desk and switched on the holographic computer screens before him. They had been a miraculous invention of the Pain Gods, as they were entirely immersive. Should Ivan find a problem

too complicated to solve he could simply step inside the computer to deal with it first-hand.

The camera high on the wall over the door was likely watching him go about his tasks, ready to reprimand him. It could see into the pores on the bridge of his nose it was so powerful. A green light flashed over the door, just once. Ivan knew what that meant and immediately felt relieved. He opened the drawer to reveal a needle, full with a fresh dose of serum. The sight was soothing to Ivan. Logging into his account on the computer with one hand, he injected the colourless serum into the crook of his arm with ease. He shook off the usual chill that ran through his veins as he felt the serum take place.

Within a minute it had the desired effect and his mind was working double time, each cog working in tune with the other. He felt powerful and unstoppable. The serum served to enhance his natural intelligence to such an extent that he could solve complex technical problems in less than thirty seconds. He was one of the privileged few that had an IQ high enough for it to be effective. His computer account was clogged with eighty-three new technical problems today but their solutions seemed to wait on the very edge of his mind. It was child's play to Ivan.

He worked through the problems seamlessly. He grew tired only when the chronic pain in his neck become too much to cope with. Before long he began to pummel the golden button on the underside of his oak desk, sending a request to the Pain Gods. After a moment, the yellow light over the door flashed once more and Ivan sighed in relief. Out of desk drawer, he withdrew the gas mask and covered his nose and mouth. A long plastic tube was connected to the desk and fed through a vent outside the room. When the gas entered the mask and bled into his bloodstream Ivan remembered why he had chosen to work for the Pain Gods and offer his brain cells to them. The chronic pain in each of his long bones seemed to dissolve within seconds. Work was the only time of day when the pain left him. It was little wonder he worked extra hours.

Despite the pain relief and actively working on the technical issues of a Chinese company with speed, Ivan couldn't help but remember that his lengthy work hours were the reason he would no longer come home to Rose asleep on the couch with a half-full glass of wine on the coffee table. The thought seemed to replace his pain at the forefront of his mind as he worked distractedly for the next number of hours.

During his twenty-minute lunch break when his salad and fettuccine was delivered to his door by some robotic assistant he never saw, he was no longer preoccupied with the work that was yet to be done for the remainder of the day as he once would have been. Nor was he thinking of Rose. Instead, his mind was focused on her mother, Amelia. Her dementia was vascular in origin and was spurred on by the increasing flow of mini-strokes. It was not only this that was breaking Rose's heart, but also Amelia's inability to recognise her own daughter or remember her name. The Pain Gods found such human problems to be innately trivial, yet there were still plenty of humans who could profit from a solution. It was this thought process that had caused them raise the prices and availability of medications. The Pain Gods felt nothing at all.

The idea gripped Ivan with a single bolt of inspiration and he snatched pen and paper from his desk. Breathing in the gas with excitement now, Ivan drafted his idea within ten minutes. He had met Amelia on numerous occasions and she, like so many others, was fond of reliving her childhood memories. Since the onset of her dementia, she had lost those memories to the vast space of her mind.

He wanted to create a prototype which would play on the idea of ordinary contact lenses. If he could manipulate a chemical reaction to allow the wearer to secrete a hormone to revive their happiest memories, then he could bring the wearer a peace of

mind which they had never had. Amelia would be filled with memories of her childhood by the seaside in Brighton.

Rose would love this if he could only pull it off. He had no shortage of intelligence and he had the drive to do it, he knew that. That thought only seemed to spur him on further and so when he returned home for the evening, despite his pain he did not sleep.

Only when the sun was rising in the morning sky did Ivan feel satisfied with the research and work he had done. He would empty his bank account today and buy the materials he needed. In the midst of the pain and exhaustion, he felt only driven by how Rose would react if he managed to get the product made.

The next day he walked with a spring in his step to his desk and thumbed the button for pain relief with a newfound eagerness to get the day's work done.

It was several months before Ivan heard from the Pain God's Patenting Organisation, yet the meeting had come around almost before he was ready. He had built the prototype and honed it until it was as close to perfect as he would accept.

He was restless. The day seemed never-ending as the council of Pain Gods discussed his creation. He was not even allowed to meet those who would decide his future with Rose. The Pain Gods in higher councils were usually seen only by those who were high-ranking officials and respected in their own right as chancellors of the company Ivan worked for.

He ran his clammy hands over his face, waiting nervously. He had worn his best suit which a combination of a baggy blazer and corduroy trousers. The office waiting room was airy and littered in succulents, but even the cheery background music was not enough to calm Ivan's nerves.

Rose had not spoken to him since the day she'd left him and his sanity had slowly declined throughout the proceeding months as he worked on the completion of the invention. In his mind, it was a certainty that by helping Amelia, Rose would return to him.

"Mr Lightwood?" It was the blonde receptionist who never stopped chewing gum. Ivan leapt to his feet and snatched his battered briefcase. He wondered how she had managed to keep her job with a robot could easily have done her tasks.

"Yes?"

"They'd like to see you now in the Conference Hall." She spoke reverently. A rush of excitement went through Ivan at this. Seeing the Pain Gods! He had never dreamed of meeting the minds behind his daily injections of pain medication. He had seen pictures on occasion, but otherwise, he was kept in the dark. He followed the receptionist to the double doors of Conference Hall. When she left immediately, he was affronted at the sight before him.

There was no table, no chairs, or even people. The door clicked shut behind him and as though the noise was a trigger. The room seemed to come alive as metal bodies withdrew from the aluminium honed walls. There were seven bodies when fully formed, with green eyes that were only too human. In truth, they were somewhat beautiful, though he could not place a gender on any of them. Each was seven foot high with broad outlines comprised of impenetrable steel. Ivan had seen their likes before but only in photos. They were robots once, but now they were much more. They were no longer manufactured by human workers, but instead functioned entirely by themselves. A superior intelligence, ever-building upon their own race.

They were an entirely new species.

Ivan had known that the Pain Gods were above human and that their singularity was unattested, but he could not hold back his feelings of awe.

"Worker 919." The voice from the God closest to the centre of the group was not a monotone machine which Ivan had anticipated, but rather an articulated echo of elegance. In the back of Ivan's mind, in a place where he was not facing the Pain Gods, he remembered a day when he had been assigned to work on the voice memorization of humans and transferring their words into any form and any language by projected sound waves. It had all been in a day's work back then.

"Ivan." Ivan corrected the God as politely as he could manage. He clasped his hands before him to hide the tremor that was beginning to run through his body. The Gods moved forward to form a line in the centre of the room. They moved like molten metal over a glass sheet. It was far from the clunking machinery movements which Ivan had read were once commonplace in the first century of the internet age.

They knew everything about him from their records, even his blood type. He felt distinctly uncomfortable. Perhaps they even knew of Rose.

"Your invention is promising. For humans, and thus, promising for us."

"Does that mean you'll patent it under my name?" Ivan could hear the hope in his voice and he hated himself for it. But perhaps things would, in fact, play out as they had in his head after all.

"I'm afraid not. Dementia is a human affliction, and the price for this reprieve would be heavy. It is applicable to more than just Dementia patients, and thus the profits would be extreme." Ivan was not such a fool as to not know what that would mean.

"There would be large profits for the patent owner," Ivan said. He had known this when he had built the prototype by using the last of his savings.

"Yes, but not for you." The sound of finality in the God's voice was obvious. They had the good grace to feign a regretful expression by deepening the lines of metal around their mouths as easily as some scientists bend and break light. Fear trickled into Ivan's bloodstream and he had to struggle harder to control his shaking hands. They were always in control.

"You have liquidated a great deal of the drug dluoxotine on your daily work - so much so that your wages have decreased accordingly over time."

"I'm aware of this." Ivan knew what was coming. His heightened intelligence was not for nought. He had taken these pay cuts despite Rose's qualms, as oftentimes the pain had been so great that he feared death. It had seemed worth it at the time.

"Thus, you will sign a wager allowing us to take control and ownership of the product, in exchange for an increased dose of dluoxotine each day of your working year." The sound of churning took over the entire room and Ivan took a step back.

"But it will get made?" Ivan asked. This, after all, was the most important part. For him, Rose and Amelia. The spokesgod nodded. From the abdomen of one of the other Gods a sheet of crisp paper printed within a blink of an eye. Only the smell of ink remained when he was handed the sheet. Ivan saw the dotted line of the contract within an instant.

"I take it I don't have a choice in this?"

Rose, was his last thought before he took the pen being held out to him.*

The shop assistant was cleaning the front window of the shop when Ivan walked past some weeks later. He gripped his walking stick tighter at the sight. His pain had grown exponentially recently and his walking stick had become a constant companion. The pain in his limbs was not at all comparable to the pain of seeing the running advertisement for a product which had once been no more than a figment of his imagination. The sales of the contact lenses had skyrocketed in recent weeks and seemed to be growing even more so over time.

He had been given a complimentary package including the final product and a note of thanks from the Pain Gods. He hadn't moved it from where it sat on the kitchen table. He had requested for one to be sent to Rose with a note of explanation but he hadn't heard anything from her. When he sat at home in his kitchen he opened the box and withdrew the pair of contacts with a hesitate air but not before putting them back down almost immediately. They had an iridescent sheen to them like imprints of the Milky Way.

Could he really fathom doing this? He wanted to be with Rose more than anything and he wanted to remember the perfect details of his memories with her. He wanted it more than anything.

He resolved that he could. He lit the gas oven with a single click of the switch on the wall and left the door wide open.

He was suddenly thankful that Rose had taken the cat.

Ivan was not practised in using the contact lenses and it took some fiddling to get them in place. His eyeballs tingled somewhat in the beginning, but he knew the entire mechanism behind it as well as he knew his own name. It would take between thirty seconds and a minute before the contacts would secrete the chemical that was strong enough to connect his synapses with speed, in order to induce a reoccurrence of his strongest memories.

In Ivan's case, he knew that all of his strongest memories involved a happy time with Rose. His final thought before the kitchen scene dissolved was of Rose's mother Amelia, and how sad he felt that she had died before experiencing her memories again so fully.

Rose was kissing his cheek lightly in the dusk sunlight of what had been a warm May Day. It had been early in their relationship and the day was one of Ivan's fondest memories. When she pulled away he laughed.

"You have cream on your face." Ivan heard himself say. They were sitting in the public park and he could smell the strawberries close by. The scene seemed to fall into place around him when his senses took place one by one.

He turned and saw the sunlight on Rose's face. Her hair had a red tint in the fading glow, but she was just as pale as ever. He felt like laughing when he saw the oversized sunglasses covering the majority of her face. Rose had always paid attention to the whims of fashion, but that one he had thought was ridiculous even at the time.

"Well, maybe I like it there!" She joked and poked her tongue at him. He remembered what was coming then but when Rose leant over and kissed him his breath escaped him entirely. He could feel the cream press onto his cheek as they kissed. The laugh began in this belly and when it reached his throat, Rose was laughing too. They were laughing and kissing and the moment was beautiful. Yet it was slipping away from Ivan Lightwood's mind. As quick as the shapes had come they were vanishing before his eyes. Each feature of the day seemed to zoom backwards into the sky like some absurd reverse tornado. One by one, flower by flower, bee by bee, he lost the scene before him.

Even his happiness in the memory seemed to vanish and mesh with confusion. The scene grew fuzzy. He grappled the scene, wishing to stretch out a hand and hold Rose close as if to save her from the oncoming tornado. Perhaps if he held her close he could smell the lavender and coconut scent of her shampoo. Yet when he turned, she was gone. The clear skylight overhead was twisting and turning until he felt nauseous. Was his head spinning? Or merely the scene?

He could not remember that his favourite colour had always been ermine and that he was deathly allergic to peanuts. Ivan could not remember the pain then or even his

own name. He lost the vaguest hint of the remembrance of the Pain Gods, or even the contacts that were swimming in his eyes.

In fact, he could not even remember Rose.

2. Reflection

The short story "The Pain Gods" describes a somewhat bleak look into the opportunities which singularity offers whilst showcasing the direct advantage of writing and drafting science-fiction prototypes. It is only through these stories that humans can become familiar with perfect technology and the possibilities for that perfection. It is important to note that this technology is strengthened when combined with human emotion. In this story this is showed through Ivan's passion for Rose. Human-Technology Interaction (HTI) is a topic which involves constant investigation as their development is constantly evolving. Science fiction prototypes offer an insight in the future roles of humans surrounding technology, regarding both the user and the developer.

The purpose of such a science fiction prototype, from the view of a writer, is to draw attention towards an undesirable futuristic world where forming meaningful communication or semiotics is made difficult by the lack of emotion in Artificial Intelligence. This forewarning allows technologists the ability to pre-empt difficult circumstances which may come to pass in the future of the world's technology development.

Though the story contains little happiness, it is not without a strength of emotion. This directly contrasts with robotic clarity of the Pain Gods. This is done for the purposes of creating an outward appearance of promising technology for human purposes. The gain of the story's science fiction prototyping technique can be seen in the description of impending technology which is entirely possible for development. By way of contrast many secondary types of technology, separate to the main prototype, are described in a snapshot fashion. The story itself may be viewed as a tool for stimulating the conversation among writers, technologists, engineers, politicians and other professionals. For the best possible outcome the primary conversation must be between the users of such technology prototypes and the creators, whilst working towards the ideal end product.

References

- [1] "*Science Fiction Prototyping: Designing the Future with Science Fiction*" Johnson, Brian. David. Morgan and Claypool. 2011.