

## Posthumanism and Literary Theory

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### Abstract

In this paper, posthumanism as a literary theory is discussed by focusing on its relationship with some other contemporary theories from a historical and philosophical perspective. Framing posthumanism as another sort of reading against the grain and especially as another type of subversive reading, it is emphasized that posthumanism as a new theoretical standpoint that has the potential of inspiring scholars studying many distinct fields ranging from cultural studies to education and from sociology to literary studies and arts which, will inevitably affect the literary analyses that will be conducted in the future.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, subversive reading, literary theory

### Reading and the Grain

Although at the moment, we as human beings believe that what we do in our daily lives including the tools we use and the methods we employ at work are the examples of the products of the final developmental stage of human history, thus products of perfection, Grey (1993) writes:

The intellectual history of the past few centuries can be characterized as pedestal bashing: a succession of successful demolitions of comforting myths through which we have sought to locate ourselves in the world. Freud pointed out that Copernicus was only the first in a line of innovative thinkers who overturned the comforts of a traditional world-view. First, Copernicus effectively displaced humanity from the physical centre of the universe. A few centuries later Darwin pointed out that humanity occupied no biologically privileged position. Then Freud claimed that one of our fondly cherished distinctive characteristics- rationality- was mostly a sham (p. 463).

One reality that is common in the contribution of Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud to history is, in fact, an easy one: they were all reading the world “against the grain” although they worked in and spoke about different fields of study; astronomy, biology, and psychology, respectively. By demolishing the myths that directed the thinking and perceptions of people, these scientists showed that the working explanations humans provided about the elements of the universe were not quite plausible.

In Tyson’s (2006) words, literary criticism “tries to explain the literary work to us” (p. 6) as there are two kinds of reading which can be written shortly as reading “with the grain” and “against the grain” (p. 7). Reading with the grain involves explaining an interpreting “the work the way it seems to invite us to interpret it” in a way to accept that the text can

be interpreted the way “the author intended us to see” although “reading against the grain implies seeing something the author didn’t intend, something of which he or she was unaware” (p. 7). As this bifurcation shows, a literary critic has a choice in deciding either to be a regular, traditional, ordinary critic who goes with the flow or he or she may prefer to work like Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud and think and suggest in a rather original way.

Such scholars who read against the grain were found in the field of literary studies. Although each critic has contributed to the development of literary criticism by reading against the grain, at least by reading the materials produced before themselves against the grain, Derrida’s contribution to literary criticism is a case in point. As Watson and Ducharme (1990) summarized:

Derrida presented ‘Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences’ at a conference on the ‘Sciences of Man’ at the Johns Hopkins University in 1966. The essay had a powerful and lasting effect on his American audience and became a kind of catalyst for the development and proliferation of what is now called deconstructive criticism. Among other things, the essay is an attack on Western philosophy and its modes of conceiving and articulating knowledge, a meditation on meaning, and a subtle critique of the contradictory system of thought underlying the nature-culture opposition which lies at the heart of Claude Lévi Strauss’s structural anthropology. The whole history of western philosophy, Derrida says, is grounded in ‘the concept of a structure’ conceived of as organized and balanced, possessing a center (p. 580).

Thus, Derrida’s reading of the history of western philosophy demonstrated “that there was no center, or that the center could not be a presence but an absence- a word, a sign-substitution (or supplement), that which is present in the center’s absence” (p. 580). Hence, “in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (p. 580).

Since then, many scholars and critics followed Derrida’s footsteps and read “human” history characterized by nature-culture dichotomy by reading it as discursive constructions rather than elements of opposing structures from which meaning was attributed. Irigaray’s text titled “This Sex Which Is Not One” is a case in point as it is a great example of reading against the grain with its “unusual” reading of women’s body. As soon as Irigaray is read, the reader realizes that her argumentative construction of female sexuality, first and foremost, deducts “men” from the picture. While her first sentence reads “Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” (p. 23), she further argues that, woman “is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies” (p. 25) despite the fact that in artistic work such as paintings or sculptures, her genitals “are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their ‘crack’” (p. 26) to which she surprisingly responds, in her lengthy description of the physically as well as sensually plural existence of the woman’s sexual organ, by writing “And her sexual organ, which is not one organ, is counted as none” (p. 26).

In 2014, Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* foreshadowed, by using historical and anthropological evidence, that in near future, genetic and other forms of biological engineering such as neuroscience "might enable us to make far-reaching alterations not only to our physiology ... but also to our intellectual and emotional capacities" (p. 403). By reading the data available in anthropology and history against the grain, that is to say, rather than to know the past but to foreshadow the future, Harari exemplified how subversive readings can alter our understanding in sciences especially in a field in which subversive reading is not acceptable because it is premised that only by means of hard facts the past can be explored.

Subversive readings show how scientific disciplines are in the constant process of formation and reformation. When the case of literary studies is considered, Watson and Ducharme (1990) discuss the effect and importance of various disciplines in the making of literary theory by confessing that "we see modern studies in history, myth, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and linguistics, for example, as significant perspectives from which to view the entire realm of literary discourse" (pp. x-xi). The amalgamation of different fields and perspectives in literary analysis is most impressive in one of the new theoretical standpoints, namely posthumanism which includes a variety of epistemic positions

that draw upon a broad field of studies, in particular quantum physics, biological sciences, bioethics, critical animal and plant studies, as well as advanced technologies that herald the beginning of a posthuman reality in which the figure of the human as we know it comes under scrutiny (Opperman, 2016, p. 24).

To redefine our existence in the world, we must first explore our present understanding of our condition. How do we, as human animals, perceive the world around us? Answering this question involves considering the term ecophobia which refers to "an irrational (often hysterical) and groundless hatred of the natural world, or aspects of it (Estok 2005: p. 112) and as the components of such psychological condition, negative feelings towards nature are rooted in and dependent on anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism (Estok 2009: 216) both of which should be examined under the heading of anthropocentrism and posthumanism. As Gane (2006) articulates, "The posthuman is one of the most important concepts in contemporary literary theory, science studies, political philosophy, the sociology of the body, cultural and film studies, and even art theory" (p. 431).

### **Anthropocentrism and Posthumanism**

As humans, we see ourselves as sovereigns in the ecosystem mainly because of our distinct capability of reasoning that separates us from animals who, simply cannot think or act as we do. "Posthuman condition is not too remote from our reality" as can be inferred from the "dynamics of human-nonhuman existence" (Opperman, 2016, p. 31). Iovino (2006) tries to answer the following question: "Where does posthuman dwell?" Her answer to this question is direct: "the posthuman does not seem to prone to dwell. In fact, it moves, relentlessly shifting the boundaries of being and things, of ontology, epistemology, and even politics" (p. 11).

While the posthumanist literature is far from uniform, its central claim is that the human has been misconceived by nearly every thinker in the Western tradition (it is worth noting here that while posthumanism has, so far, functioned through a deconstruction of the Western tradition from within, it must also find ways of engaging non-Western and non-hegemonic ontologies and epistemologies that have conceptualized the human and its relations with other beings differently). Most Western thinkers consider the human to be unlike any other kind of being—although they have often taken pains to clarify this uniqueness through comparisons with animals, machines, “savages,” slaves, and so on. Posthumanist perspectives decry the humanist positioning of the non-white and non-Western as less than human. Posthumanist research also focuses on continuities between the human and non-human. For some posthumanists, this means focusing on how cybernetics, biotechnologies, prosthetics, and computerized communications devices are re-shaping human cognition, embodied experience, and relations with the wider world.

Posthumanists argue that we have never been separate from machines and that notions of “humanness” could not be produced without machines (Pettman, 2011). In posthumanist discourse we are not human “beings” but human “animals,” or even humanimalmachines (Pettman, 2011). Affirming our own animality, we can begin to think about our inter-relations with other-than-human animals differently. Humans are like other-than-human animals in their animality, but humans are not the “same” as any other animals, since no two animals are, in fact, alike (Wolfe, 2010).

We must remember that when we use a word to refer to an object we do not refer to an isolated entity- nothing can be isolated from the rest of the universe, except in an idealized or abstracted way (Pepperell, p. 84).

One of the most injurious legacies of hierarchical reasoning is our strong “belief in human uniqueness and our exaggeratedly hierarchical relationship with other species” (Goodbody, 2014, p. 64). Posthumanists emphasize the idea that we live in this world with others; animals, machines, and objects whose fate is bound together. According to such an inspiration, we must redefine our existence with this shared-world not as sovereigns but as equals since what awaits animals is what awaits humans. We try to focus on our connections with other animate as well as inanimate systems which, as a process, requires an understanding of technological and environmental changes that make us feel weak as everything seems like getting worse despite our efforts as humans.

Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2013) critique of settler colonialism, in that both critiques resoundingly reject “the construction of non-white peoples as less than or not-quite civilized, an earlier expression of human civilization”; both critiques also reject the ideology that “makes whiteness and white subjectivity both superior and normal” (p. 74).

## Conclusion

Posthumanism allies itself with the politico-pedagogical projects of feminism, postcolonialism, anti-racism, and queer activism as it confronts the systematic dehumanization of people under the hegemonic Western form of the political right (Snaza and others, 2014, p. 49). In this sense, it questions and at times shatters various institutionalized myths surrounding our realities. As Braidotti argues during an interview with Veronese (2016) “The posthuman method amounts to higher degrees of disciplinary Hebrew translation and relies on intense the family relation of our habits of thought through encounters that shattered the flat repetition of the protocols of institutional reason” (p. 98).

While the posthumanist literature is far from uniform. Posthumanism can transform not only literary theory and its various uses in the analysis of literary texts, but also it can alter how literature is taught at all levels in three related ways. First, it forces us to reckon with how resolutely humanist almost all educational philosophy and research is. Second, it allows us to reframe education to focus on how we are always already related to animals, machines, and things within life in schools at the K-12 and university levels. Third, it enables us to begin exploring new, posthumanist directions in research, curriculum design, and pedagogical practice (Snaza et al., 2014).

Thus, this posthumanist spirit has affected people involved with literary analyses who are already aware of oppressive and hegemonic discourses of post-colonialism that oppress and silence the disadvantaged such as ethnic or religious minorities and LGBT members, peacebuilders and activists struggling for the rights of refugees all of which are represented in various literary texts. Hence, posthumanism has been welcomed as a new theoretical standpoint that has the potential of inspiring scholars studying many distinct fields ranging from cultural studies to education and from sociology to literary studies and arts. Such inspiration will inevitably affect the literary analyses that will be conducted in the future.

A final word must sound interesting as much as useful to explain what posthuman studies may bring to the analyses of literary texts: “What the animal does determines the behavior of the human and vice versa” (Villanueva Romero, 2016, p. 92). Such understanding may also bring light to various issues in which humans and animals appear as two different and at times opposing entities.

## Author’s Note

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