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What Does It Mean to be a Humanatee?

The Humanities—a term traditionally referring to the study of the arts—act as a method of discerning what it means to be human, and how we fit into the greater meaning of the world. However, as we have discussed extensively through our own study this semester, finding answers to these questions is not only an immense challenge in and of itself, but the questions themselves are often more open to interpretation as they might seem. What defines humanity? How does “humanism” fit in to this definition? What really are the humanities? Our discussion this semester, particularly of many works of literature, has allowed me the opportunity to pursue my own answer to these questions: To be human is to be capable of rational thought—to possess the ability to analyze one’s own existence and act based on a set of ideals or morals, in opposition to our natural instinct—and to develop a new sense of self, contingent on our relationship with others and the world in which we live. “Humanism” refers to the study and celebration of those qualities which make us human, and “the humanities” refer to any medium through which we explore our understanding of our own humanity and continuously challenge our perception of humanism.

What separates a human being from any other creature of the earth? Through our examination this semester we have explored several potential answers to this question: creativity, self-examination, rationality, etc., and my own definition incorporates most of these ideas to a

certain extent. Humans, unlike any other living thing, have the capacity to change themselves and act in such a way even against their own best interests. We can examine ourselves, our beliefs, and willfully alter them to affect our own futures. Other creatures can perhaps do this to an extent; mice can learn to follow a maze, dogs can learn effective ways to guilt treats out of their owners, etc., but changing behavior as a result of *learning* is not the same as intentionally doing so for a greater goal or purpose, potentially even in *spite* of conventional wisdom. Our ability to reflect on the *how* and *why* behind worldly phenomena allows us to develop these greater goals, core aspects of our self that govern our actions, and which other living creatures do not possess. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Victor's creature spends his time out in the woods observing, and drawing conclusions about both the state of the world and how he should act as a part of it. One night, he explains:

I found, with pleasure, that the fire gave light as well as heat and that the discovery of this element was useful to me in my food, for I found some of the offals that the travellers had left had been roasted, and tasted much more savoury than the berries I gathered from the trees. I tried, therefore, to dress my food in the same manner, placing it on the live embers. I found that the berries were spoiled by this operation, and the nuts and roots much improved (145).

This passage portrays a series of rational conclusions the creature draws from his experience with fire and various foods. He details a process we all undergo early in our lives—before we even know language, a core part of our humanity that allows us to draw conclusions beyond what is immediately apparent. After being exposed to literature, the creature decides: “I was dependent on none and related to none. The path of my departure was free, and there was none to

lament my annihilation. My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them” (131). The creature’s inner questioning of his self and his purpose separates him from other living beings and connects him with humanity—we cannot live solely to the extent of satiating our primal instincts; we require a greater meaning and purpose beyond our simple selves. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in its depiction of an oppressive totalitarian society, demonstrates the effects of widespread denial of that which makes us fundamentally human. Offred herself realizes: “My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born (Atwood 66). Offred must fashion herself into something that is inhuman for the sake of upholding society—she cannot express emotion, question the nature of things, or even show signs of deeper thought beyond a surface level comprehension of the things going on around her. She later goes on to explain: “my name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter” (84). With the loss of even her name, Offred cannot publicly claim any sort of identity apart from the collective position society has forced on her. An absence of all individuality oppresses the inner core of what makes us human, and in doing so makes us indistinguishable from animals.

A society that upholds individuality, a freedom of expression, and that celebrates the capabilities of rationality is one that believes in *humanism*. In other words, to believe in humanism is to celebrate that which distinguishes us from other beings, and to seek a better understanding of these differences. In her attempts to remember life before Gilead, Offred notes:

“It's strange to remember how we used to think, as if everything were available to us, as if there were no contingencies, no boundaries; as if we were free to shape and reshape forever the ever—expanding perimeters of our lives. I was like that too, I did that too” (174). Humanity’s capacity to craft our own lives—something Gilead has removed from its inhabitants—is something which humanism celebrates and encourages, though it is not without its dangers. As Uncle Ben told a young Peter Parker: “with great power comes great responsibility.” We should recognize the potential, often dramatic implications of our actions—often for our own personal gain, and at the expense of others. While humanism might imply we place our faults aside in pursuit of celebrating the goodness of humanity, ignoring them—putting them on a portrait where no one can see them—is just as much a denial of one’s humanity as a denial of honesty. What is often overlooked about humanism, however, is the final, grim nature of humanity that we must all cope with—our eventual death. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle surmises that “the more he possesses complete virtue and the happier he is, the more he will be pained at the prospect of death. For to this sort of person, living is especially worthwhile, and he is deprived of the greatest goods knowingly—and this is a painful thing” (3.9.1117b10-13). For those who have enjoyed life to its fullest, who have celebrated their humanity the most, it will in fact be the most difficult to cope with death—an essential part of humanity, that allows us to appreciate our lives that much more.

Our studies this semester have centered on this idea of *the Humanities*. But how should we define the humanities, aside from a general study of the creative arts? In my understanding, any means by which we better understand ourselves and challenge our current perceptions falls under this banner. Even something as simple as internal contemplation is no less valid than writing a

grand novel, so long as, for the individual, it achieves the intended purpose of bettering oneself.

The Handmaid's Tale presents several interesting influences of the humanities on our very psyche, even in a society that strictly oppresses their availability. Offred asserts regarding her narration: "This isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else" (204). Even if we, the readers, were not present in the equation whatsoever—Offred's story will have, for her, achieved its intended purpose. For her, the humanities were not so much about changing society as much as it was a coping mechanism. Similarly, she goes on to note: "Here is what I'd like to tell. I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again" (230). Moira's true outcome is never determined. Thus, Offred has the creative capacity to imagine it anyway she desires, to help her cope with the likely rational conclusion—that she has been killed. The humanities grant us the ability to play out different scenarios—alternate takes on reality—that we can both learn from and use to escape the tragic miseries life occasionally inflicts.

The primary reason I opted to take this course, and to become a part of Honor Humanities was because of a desire to better understand myself, and to craft a future that not only employs my passions and talents, but that improves myself and the way I interact with the world and those around me. In examining what it means to be human, in particular through the lenses of

humanism and the humanities, I have only become more in tune with these goals, and eager to see what the future of this program has to offer. I am proud to call myself human, and I am proud to call myself an “Honors Humanatee!”

P.S. Thanks for a great semester!