

Overcoming the Great Chain of Being: Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction

Sophie Brown, Deakin University, Australia

Originally established by Plato, the Great Chain of Being illustrates the hierarchical system of thought that has dominated Western philosophy for centuries. A tiered system, it places the strong white male on the top of the Chain and posits oppressed individuals sequentially on the lower tiers. This problematic system has been called into question as humanism develops into posthumanism; a theory that seeks to erase the border between hierarchical dichotomies, such as man/woman, black/white, and even human/machine. Posthuman theorists such as Rosi Braidotti and N Katherine Hayles employ posthumanism as a powerful philosophical tool in the overhaul of humanism's Great Chain of Being, while transhumanists like Nick Bostrom present posthumanism as a means of approaching the technological future. The following essay seeks to establish the difference between the philosophical and technological implications of posthumanism, linking it to contemporary young adult dystopias and science fiction. It is imperative that upcoming generations learn to question social hierarchism and approach the future with care, reducing oppression and enhancing human life.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Young adult literature

In the wake of recent advances in technology, neuroscience and biotechnology, the human race finds itself facing a vastly different world, where human superiority and humanistic ideologies are questioned. This world, often explored in science fiction and dystopian texts, has inspired a new philosophy called posthumanism, through which philosophers and scholars can critique current social ideologies and discourse. However, there are two main variants of posthumanism which I will aim to reveal and compare. The first definition of the posthuman characterises the posthuman as a being that exceeds the current state of humanity

on physical, cognitive and emotional levels (Bostrom, 2006, p.1). This aspect of posthumanity will be referred to as ‘technological posthumanism’. Under the second school of thought, posthumanity may also be understood as exactly that: *post*-humanity. It stands as a shift from humanism and its ‘restricted notion of what counts as human’ (Braidotti, 2013, p.16), effacing social hierarchism by blurring the dichotomy between male and female, white and black, and human and non-human. A problematic corresponding posthuman philosophy is that of transhumanism. Transhumanists —those who strive towards the technological posthuman future and endorse radical human enhancement— uphold the view that humanity can be perfected, and that by harnessing the powers of science, a utopian future is within reach. This not the only possible outcome however; human enhancement may spur unprecedented societal shifts that are conducive to a highly segregated authoritarian future, like those featured in many contemporary dystopian texts (Hayles, 1999, p.5). Young adult dystopias stand as a warning to readers that actively seeking posthumanity may lead to a dystopian future. One such text is *Pure* by Julianna Baggott (2012), which presents young readers with a stark dystopian future where society has diverged into two classes: Pures and Wretches. Like many critical dystopias, *Pure* explores the dangers of valuing one social group over another. It is wary of human perfectibility and hierarchisation. Despite the risks involved in the evolution of the human race, posthuman philosophy also has the potential to revise oppressive humanistic ideologies surrounding gender, race, ethnicity and body image.

Both technological and philosophical posthumanism play an important role in contemporary young adult dystopias. The first of the two understandings, where the *posthuman* refers to a human who has succeeded our current physical and mental capabilities (Bostrom, p.1), is a recurrent area of criticism in dystopian fiction. These texts often feature corrupt societies where war and conflict are commonplace. Texts such as these are known as critical dystopias (Boccolini & Moylan, 2003, p.2), and are designed to reflect our own world in its imperfection whilst also warning of a darker future, should we approach technological advancement recklessly. This common struggle links directly to the alternate understanding of posthumanism as a development of humanism. Posthuman theorist Rosi Braidotti argues that humanism revolves around ‘an ideal of bodily perfection’ that propagates the set of

‘mental, discursive and spiritual values’ (Braidotti, p.13) of our current society. By current discursive standards, some humans are valued over others (Braidotti, p.15). This can be partially attributed to the ideological implications of the Great Chain of Being: a multi-tiered system that places every living creature and plant on Earth within a hierarchical structure. Originally established by Plato, the Great Chain of Being was designed to be ‘the conception of the plan and structure of the world which, through the Middle Ages and down to the later eighteenth century, many philosophers, most men of science, and indeed, most educated men, were to accept without question.’ (Lovejoy, 1936, p.59)

Despite its connection with God, the Great Chain of Being still stands as a pillar of secular humanism. In the place of God, there is man; specifically, the white, heterosexual male. Women, people of colour, and other marginalised groups are on the lower tiers of humanism’s Great Chain of Being. Braidotti labels the classical concept of ‘Man’ as a product of social ideology and hegemonic agnotology. (Braidotti, p.28) Posthumanism de-stabilises the structure of the Great Chain of Being by regarding all humans, and even non-humans, as equals. Within most dystopian young adult texts, it is possible to outline a Great Chain of Being, even if it does not correspond to that of our own world. The society within *Pure* is no exception.

The text follows the story of Pressia Belze, a young girl who has been raised in the aftermath of a devastating nuclear attack that has left the world in a state of destruction. The survivors live in both envy and awe of those who posed the attack: a race of ‘perfect’ individuals who live in the safety of the Dome. Those who live within the Dome are known as Pures. Pressia finds herself in a battle against the hierarchical nature of her own society. *Pure* condemns the segregation of human beings into different classes by providing the reader with four distinct young voices: Pressia, Partridge, Lyda and El Capitan. Baggott’s fictional society adheres to a powerful and damaging hierarchy, in which the Pures take the top tier, and Wretches are placed—physically and metaphorically—beneath them. By positioning young readers to relate to a protagonist who is struggling against the will of their own society, young adult dystopias encourage adolescents to combat the ‘sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, and ethnocentric presumptions’ (Ferrando, 2013, p.28) of the Great Chain of Being.

The critical dystopia often reveals the same damaging societal values as the critical utopia. While utopian texts provide a ‘blueprint’ for readers to follow (Kumar, 1991, p.19), critical dystopias provide readers with the exact opposite: they reveal how *not* to approach the future. However, they do not only rely on hopelessness and fear as a means of enlightening readers. Boccolini and Moylan argue that the critical dystopia also appeals to the human need for hope by revealing ‘the potential for change’ (p.235), even in the darkest of worlds. Thus, the critical dystopia also delivers hope for redemption even in our own dark times. In a way, hope is a humanistic notion; it supports the idea of perfection and human perfectibility (Braidotti, p.13). *Pure*, along with almost every commercial young adult science fiction on the market, upholds the religious concept of redemption; the possibility of reaching a utopian goal even in the cruelest of societies. The promise of a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is a romanticised human-centric notion, suggesting that every human has the power to perfect themselves and the society they live in. Without the promise of a better world, critical dystopias hold no power. It is possible that this element of humanism—where individuals can actively alter their social circumstances—is beneficial, and is not in need of alteration.

Every character in *Pure* must come to the realisation that they hold the power as individuals to change the world they live in. With a host of first-person narrators of differing positions on the Great Chain of Being, *Pure* places equal focalisation for varying viewpoints. Crucially, no one is more important than another, and none of the characters are content living in their divided communities. The ‘benevolent’ (Baggott, p.2) Pures inside the Dome are seen as godlike beings by the Wretches in the wastelands outside, whilst gaining insight into the minds of its inhabitants (Partridge and Lyda) proves otherwise. They are equalised through the narration. Simply their names—Pures and Wretches—reveal distinct social classes that have arisen as a result of the Dome’s transhuman movements. There is also a significant amount of animosity between the two sides, suggesting that the transhuman philosophies that have driven this society have divided the human race and wreaked havoc across the landscape of Earth. Cecilia Åsberg described this kind of world as ‘a less than pretty result’ of transhumanist exploits. (Åsberg, 2018, p.157) This highly segregated fictional world may benefit from the deconstructive methods of egalitarian posthumanism, which has the potential

to enable ‘alternative analyses that explore the entanglements and mutual productions that result.’ (Åsberg, p.157) Posthuman methods such as these hold great power in young adult fiction; a platform that is able to “shape, define, expand, and alter experience” (Talley, 2011, p.232) for upcoming generations by presenting them with young protagonists facing parallel corrupt societal pressures. Pressia is concerned, for example, that the Wretches will use the Pure Partridge as ‘an angry sacrifice’ in revolt against the ‘rich and the lucky’ (Baggott, p.114), because his privileges are exactly that: a matter of luck. During the chaos that followed the atomic bombs set off by the Dome, societal values shifted from awe for the ‘benevolent’ Pure to violent disdain. In the same way that men came to be valued over women through damaging agnatological discourse, the Wretches came to see Pures as ‘deities.’ (Baggott, p.44) The text positions the reader to critique this notion—Lyda and Partridge are just as human as Pressia and the Wretches—and encourages them to re-think the apparently unshakeable ideologies in our own world that value one human over another. These particular ideas therefore warn adolescents that seeking posthumanity can lead to the magnification of current social inequalities; a vastly different standpoint to that of Rosi Braidotti, who views posthumanism as a means of effacing humanistic social hierarchies (p.16). This suggests that posthumanism is not intrinsically good or bad but yet to be determined. The future must be approached with caution in order to avoid a dystopian outcome like that of *Pure*.

Another interesting aspect of *Pure* is the contradictory ways in which it presents the non-human. It places value on Pressia, whose body is fused with a doll head with ‘blinky eyes that click when she moves’ (Baggott, p.9), and also on Partridge, the ‘boy with birds in his back’ (Baggott, p.43). It also critiques the Pures, who appear fully human. With ‘smooth and clear’ skin and ‘straight and very white’ teeth, they are closer to what our current society would see as beautiful, but they are also cruel and condescending. The notion that ‘the ugliness is what makes the beautiful things beautiful’ (Baggott, p.72) in the world of *Pure* suggests that beauty is an arbitrary construct defined by social ideologies. This parallels the relative importance of posthumanism, where the sublimation of certain individuals is

eradicated. The Wretches, like the Freaks, can be described as grotesques: inhuman beings that blur the lines between human and inhuman and place value on identity over appearance.

In the context of both ideological and technological advancement, posthumanism is an important tool in the discussion of science fiction and dystopian young adult texts. In most cases, it stands as a stark warning to young readers about the risks of blindly pursuing radical body enhancements, whilst also revealing the damaging nature of hierarchical ideologies. When defined as *post-humanism*, the philosophy promotes reflection on the sublimation of certain individuals and seeks to efface the boundaries between man/woman, black/white, male/female, human/machine, etc. Thus, posthumanism could allow the human race to achieve complete equality and tolerance, if approached correctly. Technological posthumanism is driven by transhumanists, who often tend to strive towards the posthuman future with little foresight. Young adult science fiction and dystopian texts commonly critique the transhuman school of thought for its tendency to exacerbate current ideological prejudice. By incorporating considered posthuman themes in young adult fiction, authors hold the power to influence the ideological standings of an entire younger generation of readers.

REFERENCES

- Åsberg, C 2018, “Feminist Posthumanities”, *Posthuman Glossary*, eds. R Braidotti & M Hlavajova, Bloomsbury Academic, London, United Kingdom, pp.157–160.
- Baggott, J 2012, *Pure*, Grand Central Publishing, New York.
- Boccolini, R & Moylan, T 2003, *Dark Horizons*, Psychology Press, Abingdon-on-Thames, United Kingdom.
- Bostrom, N 2006, ‘Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up’, *Ethics and Emerging Technologies*, pp. 218-234.
- Braidotti, R 2013, *The Posthuman*, Polity, Cambridge, United Kingdom.
- Ferrando, F 2013, ‘Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms Differences and Relations’, *Existenz: An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 26-32.
- Hayles, N K 1999, *How We Became Posthuman*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Lovejoy, A O 1936, *The Great Chain of Being*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Talley, L A 2011, “Young Adult”, *Keywords for Children’s Literature*, NYU Press, New York, United States, pp.228–232.