

Cyborgs, Posthumanism and Short Fiction

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Attempts to theorize the short story deal primarily with early, modern, or contemporary stories that feature ordinary human characters. Several theorists describe the short story as an impressionistic representation of sacred experience. Unlike the novel, a public form that springs from encounters with the everyday, the short story depicts the inner reality of the self in its relation to eternal rather than temporal phenomena. But if the short story depicts momentary mythic encounters with the sacred, then what happens when the protagonist is no longer human in the traditional sense, or even postmodern—the two for all practical purposes being physiologically identical—but rather posthuman – a cyborg? A cyborg is any human with a technophilic body, defined as a human/machine symbiosis. As the body becomes technophilic, whether through the modification of functional organic structures or through genetic engineering, the quality of subjective experience mediated by this body will no doubt undergo significant change. As we move from the postmodern to the posthuman as a cultural construct, stories depicting posthuman experiences will no longer be confined to the subgenre of science fiction but will increasingly extend to all types of short fiction. This essay demonstrates the possibility of posthuman cyborgs losing contact with the sacred through an analysis of James Joyce's story "The Dead," Kurt Vonnegut's story "Harrison Bergeron," and William Gibson's story "Burning Chrome." As these works of short fiction suggest, the experience of an inner space, commensurate with the emergence of the core of human nature, does not depend on biological enhancement through electronic mergers. In fact, any artificial inducement through technology would probably result in a transformation of the self away from human nature's innate capacity for transcendence. This assumption is corroborated by Clark's biased and patently false assertion that the "idea of 'mind as spirit-stuff' is no longer scientifically respectable" (43)—a claim discredited by the vast interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies in which consciousness is increasingly accepted as an autonomous entity.

Attempts to theorize the short story—as in the collections edited by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (1989) and Charles E. May (1994)—deal primarily with early, modern, or contemporary stories that feature ordinary human characters. Charles May cites several theorists who describe the short story as an impressionistic representation of sacred experience. Unlike the novel, a public form that springs from encounters with the everyday, the short story depicts “the immaterial reality of the inner world of the self in its relation to eternal rather than temporal reality” (May 133). But if the short story depicts momentary mythic encounters with the sacred, then what happens when the protagonist is no longer human in the traditional sense, or even postmodern—the two for all practical purposes being physiologically identical—but rather posthuman—a cyborg? A cyborg is any human with a technophilic body, defined as a human/machine symbiosis (Hayles 84–112). As the body becomes technophilic, whether through the modification of functional organic structures or through genetic engineering, the quality of subjective experience mediated by this body is bound to undergo significant change. As we move from the contemporary/postmodern to the posthuman as a cultural construct, stories depicting posthuman experience will no longer be confined to the subgenre of science fiction but will increasingly extend to all types of short fiction.

As Katherine Hayles says in *How We Became Posthuman*, “Although in many ways the posthuman deconstructs the liberal humanist subject, it... shares with its predecessor an emphasis on cognition rather than embodiment. William Gibson makes the point vividly in *Neuromancer* when the narrator characterizes the posthuman body as ‘data made flesh’” (5). Generally speaking, while the liberal humanist subject tends to experience the world conceptually in novels and emotionally or mythically in short fiction, the posthuman subject, according to Hayles and others, will increasingly experience reality computationally in terms of data, or thought/information. This emphasis on cognition rather than emotional embodiment, I will argue, may result from the possibility that the artificial (e.g. genetic) modification of the human body will end up modifying, or rather diminishing, the capacity of the human species to sustain the quality of consciousness necessary for sacred experience. Francis Fukuyama in *Our Posthuman Condition* argues that the biotechnology revolution may not only undermine human nature but also have terrible consequences for our political order. As represented by short fiction, the human capacity for mythic encounters with sacred experience may also suffer adverse consequences. Through the example of selected short stories, including science fiction, as well as a brief consideration of the nature of consciousness, I will demonstrate that posthuman encounters may indeed preclude sacred experience as we know it today.

In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, Donna Haraway signals three crucial breakdowns in the boundary between machine and organism: first, nothing enforces the human and animal separation, including tool use, social behavior, language, and reason; second, the distinction between animal-human organism and machine is leaky because of the ambiguous difference between the natural and the artificial; and third, as a subset to the second, the “boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise” (149–81). In her feminist approach to cyberculture, Haraway claims that “No objects, spaces or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in common language” (163). Her definition of cyborg, however, does not take into account consciousness as-such, but only the temporal self: “The cyborg is a kind of dissembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code” (*ibid.*). For codifying the self and redesigning the body, bio- and communication technologies become the essential tools. Haraway defines cyborg writing as not about the fall from an earlier pre-linguistic wholeness, but about survival by means of tools as prosthetic devices. Cyborg writing also rejects perfect communication through a master code, “the central dogma of phallogocentrism” (176).

Throughout “A Cyborg Manifesto” Haraway problematizes the distinction between unity and diversity. She argues that dualisms such as self/other, mind/body, culture/nature lead to the domination of women, and that the idea of the self as One who is not dominated is an illusion, given that the self cannot escape a dialectic with the other. Ultimately, Haraway thinks that we’ll be saved only by destroying duality and the organic, not through deconstruction but through the “liminal transformation” of a machine-organism symbiosis (1991, 177). From a feminist view point, a cyborg, which is short for “cybernetic organism,” comprises not an impermeable organic wholeness, but symbiosis, prosthetic devices, hybrids, chimeras and mosaics: “Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. The replicant Rachel in the Ridley Scott film *Blade Runner* stands as the image of a cyborg culture’s fear, love and confusion” (177–78). One difference between machine and organism noted by the physicist Jean Burns, however, is that humans have volition or free will, which is associated with consciousness, while machines do not; indeed, the physical effects of volition are not explainable “by presently know physical laws because these laws encompass only determinism and quantum randomness” (32), which are not what are indicated by consciousness or volition.

The posthuman, however, is not a homogenous construct. At least two distinct definitions of the posthuman exist, as suggested by Andy Clark in *Natural-Born Cyborgs*. The cyborg can be understood either as a physical merging of the human and machine through wire implants or genetic modification, or, as Clark proposes, a merging “consummated without the intrusion of silicon and wire into flesh and blood, as anyone who has felt himself thinking *via* the act of writing already knows” (5). In this friendly version of posthumanism, tools such as pen or computer are not just external aids but integral aspects of the problem-solving systems that civilizations have developed over the ages. Clark considers the notion of “post-human” to be a misnomer for a thoroughly human tendency to “merge our mental activities with the operations of pen, paper, and electronics” (6). We are already natural-born cyborgs: “*creatures whose minds are special precisely because they are tailor-made for multiple mergers and coalitions*” (7, Clark’s emphasis). In this definition, technology has always been geared toward self-transformation. The mind is not confined to its biological “skin bag” but has the potential to extend into and manipulate the physical environment.

The posthuman notion that the mind extends beyond the body, while hardly a novelty, is here understood primarily as a material rather than the spiritual phenomenon of the world’s contemplative traditions. For Clark, self-transformation has become a “snowballing/bootstrapping process of computational and representational growth” (8). He argues that the mind-body problem is really a “mind-body-scaffolding problem,” a problem of understanding “how human thought and reason is born out of looping interactions between material brains, material bodies, and complex cultural and technological environments” (11, Clark’s emphasis). What this friendlier definition of the human-machine merger suggests is that the posthuman intensifies and extends the postmodern condition of materialism, relativism, and computation, thereby aspiring not only to supercede but also to repress the transcendental, mythical oneness and consciousness associated with traditional short fiction and perennial psychology. In both versions of the posthuman-invasive and noninvasive—the traditional notion of human nature comes under threat. In the posthuman condition, cognitive machinery and technological skills in manipulating nature take precedence over the powers of consciousness that accomplish similar ends in a natural, spontaneous, and environmentally friendly manner. The posthuman, therefore, emphasizes computation and technological expertise in an outward, physical domination of the natural world. But as understood by the world’s contemplative traditions, as well as by artists and writers, this outward approach, conducted at the expense of innate qualities of human nature, can be made redundant by methods of accomplish-

ing the same ends inwardly on the level of consciousness, as described for example in the Vedic tradition, notably the Upanishads and Yoga Sutras, and exemplified by the mythic encounters of short fiction.

Some believe that human nature began to change in modernism and continued to change with a vengeance in postmodernism. According to Virginia Woolf, "In or about December 1910, human character [read nature] changed" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," quoted in Pinker 404). But Steven Pinker, who questions the notion that the mind is a blank slate subject to radical modification through external influence, argues that modern science has no conclusive evidence that human nature has changed in recorded history: "The modern sciences of mind, brain, genes, and evolution are increasingly showing that... [the blank slate] is not true" (421). This, however, does not mean that human nature cannot be changed inadvertently through human-computer interaction, as in tampering with the spinal cord through medical implants to enhance sensory experience. Indeed, as Katherine Hayles, Elaine Graham, and Robert Pepperell note, through the proliferation of bio-engineered prosthetics that integrates humans and machines, "the practical distinction between machine and organism is receding" (Pepperell 7).

The posthuman science of mind thus tends to promote cognitive activity and intensify the computational response of the human nervous system; short fiction in contrast tends to promote cognitive stasis or disinterestedness through aesthetic contemplation. Pinker calls art a pleasure technology (405), but while an aesthetic object, like short fiction, may organize pleasurable stimuli and direct them to the emotions, pleasure itself can be said to have its source not in external objects but in witnessing consciousness. Borrowing from Asian dramaturgy, Antonin Artaud in *Theatre and Its Double* calls the witnessing or pure state of consciousness a "void in thought" (71), that screen of qualityless awareness which is non-changing in itself but which mirrors all mental activity or qualia: thought, sensation, memory, emotion, and mood. If we examine representative modern short fiction by James Joyce, Raymond Carver, Kate Chopin, Jorge Luis Borges, and others, we find that epiphanic moments experienced by characters or the preclosural points experienced by the reader derive from a level of consciousness associated with a transcendence of time, place, and culture. Posthuman technology attempts to simulate these experiences on a mechanical/electronic basis through "telepresence," or virtual presence in cyberspace. Arguably, the transcendence of spatial/temporal boundaries constitutes the core of human nature, as described for instance by Vedic literature and Indian literary theory.

Yohanan Grinshpon in *Crisis and Knowledge* describes the heart of storytelling in terms of "the healing potency of 'knowledge of the better self'"

(viii). As opposed to the “lesser self,” the better self is defined as Atman or witnessing consciousness, which Grinshpon refers to as “Vedic otherness” (5). The experience of the better self does not involve thought or computation, the hallmark of the posthuman lesser self with its emphasis on a heightened conceptuality; rather it involves a state of Being, or a void in thought. As May and Lohafer suggest, short fiction leads to these ineffable trans-conceptual, trans-linguistic moments of Being—thereby invoking a taste of the core of human nature. In contrast, the posthuman by definition militates against the better self in its quest for the empirical advantages of “knowledge-based electronics” (Clark 34)—extreme forms of cognitive activity enhanced by technological mergers. In short prose narratives, the knowledge and skill in action associated with the lesser self serve as the necessary context through which awareness transcends conceptuality in attaining the better self as a state of Being.

The computational responses of the mind also frustrate the attempt to overcome solipsism and experience a transcendental intersubjectivity—a move from the lesser to the better self. Patrick C. Hogan argues that “a great deal of culture—especially aspects of culture that overlap religion—operates to help us cope with, or ‘manage’ (as Norman Holland might put it), the pain that is a necessary result of consciousness, or more exactly, the isolation that is part of consciousness and the pain that results from self-consciousness. Literature has a particularly prominent place in this ‘management’” (2004, 119). Hogan uses the term consciousness as if it were synonymous with what in eastern thought is identified with the mind and its conceptual content, not with pure consciousness or consciousness being aware of itself in the sense that I’m using it here. Because of the mind’s subject/object duality, Hogan claims that we cannot disprove solipsism, that “we can never experience anything except our own, utterly private self and that, no matter how much we would like to share that self, we cannot” (121). In other words, we can never have a transpersonal, transcendental experience. Again, from an advaitan perspective this is true only for the computational mind and not for consciousness itself. Indeed, as Hogan points out, “In Vedantism, the ideal is not simply heaven, but moksa, release from the cycle of birth and death. This release is a realization that material particularity is maya or illusion and that all individual souls are one with Brahman or godhead. Suffering, in this view, is the result of attachment to maya, to the illusion of particularity, prominently the particularity of the self [or mind]” (136). As posthumanism expands, our technological emphasis on the discriminating powers of the mind will reinforce solipsism and make it increasingly difficult for cyborgs to escape their unbearable solitude.

As Lohafer, May, Hogan and others have noted, literature, and especially short fiction, helps us to “manage” solitude and even to transcend the mind into the better self. Fiction can achieve this because of the close connection between the emotional effects of perception and imagination. While fiction consists only of words, these words stimulate the imagination. Neurobiological research tells us that the same kind of brain activity occurs in both the imagination and ordinary perception (see Kosslyn 295, 301, 325; and Rubin 41–46, 57–59). Because of this neurological link, we can experience a powerful intimacy with others through the art of fiction. According to Hogan, “consciousness is not an objectal part of a causal sequence involving the brain. It is, rather, an existential experience—an existential experience that is, I suspect, inseparable from particular brain states, an existential experience that is correlated with neurological patterns in every particular, but which still is not those neurological patterns” (140). Nevertheless, existential experience depends on the delicate balance of our neurological patterns that show alarming signs of being disrupted by posthuman interference. If the technologically enhanced particularity of the computational mind supplants the unifying power of our emotional makeup, then the epiphanic moments of short fiction, as in James Joyce, may one day disappear.

In Joyce’s story “The Dead,” Gabriel Conroy intuits his better self as a result of a new sense of inferiority regarding his lesser self when he awakens from his conventional knowledge of marriage and the limitations of his relationship to his wife, Gretta. After hearing Gretta’s story of her dead love, Michael Furey, Gabriel realizes that what he took for real is only a cognitive illusion, and that a much wider reality lies beyond his conceptions of the world. In what Susan Lohafer would call the final closure of the story (307), Gabriel’s awakening is suggested by falling snow that covers not only the known world outside their hotel window but also extends to encompass everything else in the mind’s eye: “His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end upon all the living and the dead” (“The Dead” 59). The homogeneous blanket of snow symbolizes the unity of Being after the discriminating activity of thought has run its course. At this point in the story, Gabriel and the reader experience a final moment of contemplation, a suspension of all activity in a simple identity with Being, free of desire, thought, ego, self-contradiction and paradox.

In Lohafer’s cognitive approach to short fiction, the “anterior, penultimate, and final closural sentences as a *sequence*” (308, Lohafer’s emphasis) can like epiphanies be seen as a series of gaps in cognitive activity through which character and reader experience an opening or clearing of awareness,

a flash of truth, a subtle revelation. Unlike knowledge about mental content involving the duality of knower and known, this experience consists of a glimpse of being at one with pure awareness—a unity that has its basis in the void of thought, not in thought itself. Through its structural sequence of closures, short fiction is ideally suited to suspend the activity of thought, revert the eye from the lamented past and anticipated future, and focus attention on the timeless present.

In traditional, modernist and postmodernist short fiction, epiphanic moments and closural points open awareness to the core of human nature. The content of the story combined with the aesthetic structure of its conceptual closures give the reader access to the better self. We see this, for example, in Kate Chopin's early modernist work "The Story of an Hour," in which Mrs. Mallard, described by the narrator as afflicted with heart trouble, dies of an apparent heart attack when her husband suddenly reappears after reportedly having been killed in a train accident.

The final closural sentence—"When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills" (263)—presents a dramatic irony. The reader knows that the cause of Mrs. Mallard's death is not joy but grief: she is shocked and distressed by the loss of her newfound freedom through her husband's unanticipated return. The revelation here emerges in the implicit gap between the lesser and better selves. That is, our mythic encounter with the better self, implied in Mrs. Mallard's feeling "Free! Body and soul free!" (262), emerges from our common sense of innate unboundedness beyond space, time, and causality. As construed today by the receptive reader, the double irony of Chopin's "Story of an Hour" is that Mrs. Mallard's death has a twin cause: not only is she stricken by the return of her husband and the fetters of marriage; she has also failed to live freely within social boundaries. The story suggests that the materialism of the natural human condition—which unlike the materialism of radical posthumanism is not inevitable or inescapable—poses no physical barrier to psychic freedom. Despite Hogan's emphasis, as noted above, on the unbearable solitude of "consciousness," our sacred and profane selves go hand in hand. In a posthuman age, however, with natural-born cyborgs subjugated to technological mergers invading ever more abstract regions of inner space, to escape materialism in the form of conceptual boundaries will become increasingly problematic. Under these circumstances, as discussed below, we may find it truly difficult to share existential experience beyond the purely physical sensations induced by simulated stimulations, as disturbingly depicted by William Gibson; or we may even find it impossible thanks to a constitutional prohibition against the better self, as described by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

It is reasonable to expect, therefore, that short fiction with cyborg characters will exhibit a decline in mythic encounters with the sacred. Moreover, as readers in general undergo the transformation of self that Clark prescribes for natural-born cyborgs, they will also suffer a gradually diminished aptitude for aesthetic experience or the sublime. In "Harrison Bergeron," Vonnegut speculates on a future society in which conformity is enforced upon anyone with exceptional abilities by the Handicapper General, Diana Moon Glampers. In this society, "Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else" (4)—an equality decreed by Amendments to the Constitution. George and Hazel Bergeron's 14 year old son, Harrison, is arrested by agents of the US Handicapper General for being exceptional. Also highly intelligent, George the father has to wear a "handicap radio in his ear" that regularly emits a sharp noise to preclude his brain ever giving him an unfair advantage. Harrison finally escapes, discards his handicapper impediments and dances with an equal audacious girl on a TV show watched by his parents. Glampers at this moment bursts into the studio and shoots them both dead with her shotgun.

Through an early version of the posthuman, Vonnegut envisions a society that frustrates any move toward the better self. The same often applies in the short fiction of William Gibson, whose characters are often cyborgs of more invasive mergers. In Gibson's story "Burning Chrome," Bobby Quine and Automatic Jack, two ace hackers, break through the Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics (ICE) of Chrome's data base to steal a fortune. Jack then tries to help Tiger, their cyborg girlfriend, by giving her money so she can stop working at the House of Blue Lights. At the end of the story, Jack speculates on Tiger's posthuman condition:

working three-hour shifts in an approximation of REM sleep, while her body and a bundle of conditioned reflexes took care of business. The customers never got to complain that she was faking it, because those orgasms were real. But she felt them, if she felt them at all, as faint silver flares somewhere on the edge of sleep. (191)

Tiger's neuroelectronics enable the customers to have it both ways, "needing someone and wanting to be alone at the same time" (191). But at what cost? Tiger and her customers have been reduced to pseudo sentient posthumans. Rather than wanting to escape the unbearable solitude of their posthuman condition, they relish in the particularity of selfish desires, unaware of what they're missing. Being displaced from the sacredness of existential experience not only precludes genuine fulfillment, but also reinforces solitude and the craving for ever more sensational forms of physical indulgence to intensify the illusion of intimacy. As Gibson's story suggests, they can have

physical sensations without conscious awareness, or conscious awareness without emotional contact, but seldom the experience of intersubjective empathy through contact with their better selves. This dimension of human nature has lost its appeal and is in peril of being phased out by electronic replacements.

As suggested by the short fiction discussed here, the experience of an inner space, commensurate with the emergence of the better self, or the core of human nature, does not depend on biological enhancement through electronic mergers. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that any artificial inducement through what Mark Weiser calls "ubiquitous computing" (94–110) would probably result in a transformation of the self away from human nature's innate capacity for transcendence or a void in thought. This assumption is further corroborated by Clark's biased and patently false assertion that the "idea of 'mind as spirit-stuff' is no longer scientifically respectable" (43)—a claim discredited by the vast interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies in which consciousness is increasingly accepted as an autonomous entity (see Chalmers, and Forman). Clark's statement is an example of how technology collapses the subjective, first person "I" and "We" domains into the materialist, third-person "It" domain (Wilber 2000, 67)—apparently the ultimate and possibly posthumous goal of the posthuman condition.

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