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WHAT IS HUMAN? URSULA LEGUIN AND SCIENCE FICTION'S GREAT THEME

Keith N. Hull

When H. G. Wells's Time Traveller encounters mankind's descendants in 802701 A.D., he has a right to question their humanity. The Eloi, though retaining our basic appearance, are smaller, weaker, feeble-willed beings who have lost nearly all the human intellect that has made us dominant. The Morlocks have similarly lost their intellectual birthright but look even less like us. They do, however, maintain characteristic human activities. They use not just tools but machines and have a manufacturing economy, trading goods for unwilling Eloi flesh.

A reader who asks on the basis of the Time Traveller's observations "are these beings human?" is in a dilemma. The Eloi look more like us than the Morlocks do, but the Morlocks behave more like us. Which is sufficient to define humanness, appearance or behavior? The Time Traveller strikes a scientific compromise: he declares both races new species of genus Homo, their main differences from us being matters of degree rather than kind, and he classifies the Morlocks as "less human and more remote than our cannibal ancestors of three or four thousand years ago" (96).

The narrator, who tells the story of the Time Traveller telling his story, has another view. Accepting the Time Traveller's yarn as true, he looks at the flowers that Weena, an Eloi, had given her protector from
the human past and says they comfort him in the face of a future "still black and blank," that they are evidence that "even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness lived on in the heart of man" (141). Clearly the narrator accepts the Eloi as human on the basis of another human characteristic, tender emotions.

Wells, with his Darwinian views, saw evolution as a process operating in virtually indistinguishable steps to create a new species. At what point in its fictitious future did humanity cease to exist? What tests would we, if we were time travelers, apply to Morlock and Eloi to determine whether they are human? Sensibly, Wells saw that the answers were not simple, and—despite the scientific advances since his time—they still are not. The Time Traveller looks partially to biological and behavioral evidence, though he also finally responds in a more subjective way—what is human somehow touches us as human.

Where these scientific and emotional lines of thought join lies one of science fiction's great themes. Extensively and seriously science fiction explores the question, "how do we define humanity?" This question appears different from that implicit in great works that have defined traditional literature. The Iliad, Shakespeare's plays, and Goethe's Faust posit human beings and explore the dimensions and complexity of their behavior, asking, "as human beings how do these characters behave and what does their behavior mean?" Achilles, though he is descended from gods; Iago and Macbeth, though they behave inhumanly; Faust, though he craves and achieves superhuman power: all remain unquestionably human, and their meaning lies in their being our fellows; they show us that pride, wrath, humility, depravity, and ambition help characterize and define humanity. Science fiction turns the question around, asking, "can this being be included as human despite its nonhuman qualities?"

The greatness of this theme can partially be measured by its immediate importance, just as the greatness of Othello can be partially weighed by asking what Iago tells us about evil. Science and technology conspire to press on us the problem of what "human" means. As East African archeology fills in our ancestors' possible development, molecular biologists establish our genetic kinship to the great apes. Where, along the genetic and evolutionary continua, does humanity begin? This is not just a scientific question. Artificial intelligence research, genetic engineering, life-prolonging machines, the abortion controversy, and the self-styled scientific creationism movement all present immediate practical challenges to our conception of what a human being is. Can we call a human fetus or someone who is alive only in the most fundamental sense a human being?

Science fiction has undertaken the theme of defining humanity with vigor, ingenuity, and depth, yet the basic device for introducing it is common in popular literature—the alien, the other. Here is the science fic-
tion buffs familiar ground; we all know the forms that aliens can take: extraterrestrials, monsters, machines with human personalities, animals evolved into telepathically speaking companions, human beings who acquire sub- or superhuman capabilities. Frequently, the alien figure raises the question of defining humanity, a phenomenon that stretches to modern science fiction's origins. Mary Shelley's monster suffers bitterly because despite enviable human intelligence and handsome looks, his biology is nonhuman. No matter how human he looks and acts, he is physically alien, and his origins betray him. But then perhaps a reader's sadness at the monster's decay is an indication that, like Wells's Time Traveller and his friend, we attribute humanity to whatever has human feelings.

We see this sentiment in a more recent phenomenon, the wonderful Star Wars serial. The machines C-3PO and R2-D2 seem more human than Darth Vader, whose integration of machinery into his body keeps him alive but dehumanizes him. Only when he is dying and Luke removes the machinery do we see that the archvillain is human after all, though the robots and teddy-bear Ewoks still have the upper hand when human-ness is at stake. They are as courageous, intelligent, and dedicated as Darth Vader, but they are also witty, vulnerable, sometimes weak, always staunchly individualistic, and, most importantly, good.

In the face of such sentiment, what do appearance, sociology, and genetics count? In other works sometimes everything, but I don't really want to answer the question. My point is that science fiction faces it seriously. Furthermore, in those works in which the question of defining humanity arises most seriously science fiction reaches some of its greatest artistic heights and comes closest to the standards implicit in mainstream literature. I do not mean by this that science fiction is somehow second-rate or that it should necessarily aspire to traditional greatness. I do mean, though, that in treating the theme of how to define humanity science fiction makes a significant, if not its most significant, literary contribution.

As I planned this essay I reviewed a list of science fiction milestones compiled by writer and academic James Gunn in Alternate Worlds, his history of science fiction (243-250). Looking over such lists and recalling the titles I hear mentioned by fellow fans or by reviewers, I am struck by how often in these works the human element is more compelling than exotic technologies or adventures for their own sakes. What seems to be an enduring quality of most great science fiction works, especially of the last twenty-five or thirty years, is that their center of interest is their characters. Rather than encountering human beings acting as the creators of great technology, readers often find themselves involved with interesting people struggling for survival, noble causes, and even personal fulfillment in the face of an astonishing range of technology-determined conditions.

Given their immense relativistic leaps into the future caused by travel
on faster-than-light ships, how can Joe Haldeman’s soldiers in *The Forever War* find true love and happiness when their old lives lie dead in the past? How can Gordon Dickson’s Dorsai mercenaries preserve their warrior code in the face of infinitely variable circumstances set up by mankind’s spread through the galaxy? Abstracted this way, these commendable authors’ plots sound a bit like soap opera because the books’ interest lies in their revealing the truly human amid the marvelous. Such grappling with human problems is an artistic advance over the adjective-laced, marvel-wonder-astounding stories of science fiction’s alleged golden age, but, again, the genre reaches its greatest potential—and probably its widest audiences—when it begins to press the issue of what defines “human.”

In terms of literary accomplishment and wide audience, one of science fiction’s most phenomenal successes has been Frank Herbert’s *Dune*. In his transition from Paul Atreides to Muad’Dib, Herbert’s hero achieves the ability to see alternative futures and to tap the knowledge of ancestors living within him. Starting as human, he clearly achieves superhuman capabilities, dragging along the emotional baggage that helps label us and him “human.” Much of the power of *Dune*—the first book, not the entire series—stems from Paul’s struggles to reconcile his human and superhuman identities, which must exist concurrently. Gratifyingly, the struggle itself finally labels him as human. He keeps as concubine the Fremen woman Chani, whom he truly loves, but he marries the Princess Royal, an expedient he adopts to avoid a catastrophic holy war. By this typically human compromise Paul assures us he is one of us and only partially Muad’Dib—but how much is human? We never know.

One of today’s most praised and read science fiction authors has incorporated wholesale the question of defining humanity as a dominant theme in her work. Ursula K. LeGuin, in her several major novels, brings into conflict beings that by appearances and behavior could be human, though there is some factor present that creates doubt or, on the other hand, misguided certainty. Earlier, when I used the term “other,” I was borrowing from LeGuin, who defines “other” as “the being who is different from yourself” (*Language* 87). When she uses the term regarding her own work, however, LeGuin means something apart from the usual robot-alien-telepath-superhuman. Her others tend to be less different from us than those of most writers and deliberately suggest conventional humanity. Generally, in LeGuin’s work important other-human differences give way to important similarities.

*Rocannon’s World* presents a whole range of types termed “humanoid.” On the novel’s first two pages we find listed three distinct races, one composed of two “pseudoraces” that appear to contain at least cousins to Rocannon, the novel’s one more or less certified human being. In *Planet of Exile* Terran settlers live next to the Hilf, primitive nomads who ap-
pear to be human and who become the Terrans' allies in a fight for mutual survival against the Gaal, another possibly human race. An obvious parable about real-world conservationist, racial, and colonial politics, *The Word for World Is Forest* pits human beings against a smaller, primitive race, the Athsheans, whom they regard as nonhumans subject to exploitation as animals. *City of Illusions* starts with Falk on Terra; except for his cat's eyes he is apparently human and has been raised by a human family to possess the full range of human emotions. As the novel pits him against obviously alien invaders, Falk finds out the truth about his alien origins while his own sense of humanness deepens. In these instances, the theme of defining what is human takes shape in the alliance that human beings form with possible humans; physical and cultural differences prove relatively superficial in the face of mutual concerns; respect, affection, and love cross lines drawn between apparent species. The inevitable result is to broaden the definition of human in the characters' and the readers' minds.

Two LeGuin novels of unquestionably high standing, even among readers who generally do not care for science fiction, are *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. In these novels LeGuin continues the practice she describes in her Introduction to *Rocannon's World*, where she describes herself as writing science fiction based on "social science, psychology, anthropology [and] history," presumably instead of on mathematics, the physical and biological sciences, or engineering (*Language* 126). The result, too infrequent in science fiction, is an emphasis on culture, with barely enough hard science to justify the alien circumstances in which LeGuin's characters find themselves. Perhaps because of this cultural emphasis LeGuin's questions about humanness are as profound as any in science fiction.

In LeGuin's universe humanity—if it is humanity—was scattered in a past too remote for most races to remember. Instead, people have mostly rumors, speculations, and legends. One race, the Hainish, claims to be the source of all mankind, though the other races often doubt the claim and Hainish history itself is incomplete. In much of LeGuin's work then the question is literally universal, "are all these beings truly one race?"

Sometimes the differences between races are completely social and not biological. Interbreeding is possible, and outward appearances are identical. Rolery, a Hilf woman, and Jakob, a Terran, in *Planet of Exile* are from races that have lived side by side for six hundred years, neither convinced that the other is human; only when they must fight together do Hilf and Terran learn enough mutual respect that Rolery and Jakob can cross cultural barriers, love, and eventually bear children.

In other LeGuin novels, however, the differences are not so superficial. Falk, a descendant of Jakob and Rolery in *City of Illusions*, appears human in all respects but his eyes, which are like a cat's. In *Rocannon's World* and *The Word for World Is Forest* massive cultural differences and
size call into question the humanity of the various humanoid races. The greatest differences between humans and possible humans, however, are found in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. On the planet Gethen the inhabitants are androgynous; individuals possess male and female sexual organs and can impregnate or become pregnant. Unlike our branch of humanity, they are not constantly capable of sexual activity; rather, like animals, they become sexually active periodically. Clearly such people can be defined as nonhuman on the basis of sexual characteristics; after all, among humans as we know them—and as the Hainish in the novel know them—distinct sexes and nonstop sexual capability constitute powerfully definitive characteristics. In our world we are alone among mammals in our sexual readiness, and among the Gethenians the Hainish—by LeGuin’s witty twist—appear perverted.

Is sexuality a fair test of humanness? Are the Gethenians indeed human? After all, their appearances are not quite human either; their faces’ softness belies their “ambisexuality.” If we relegate sexuality to being only one test of humanness and introduce sociological evidence, the Gethenians fare better; in fact, they ironically excel us in fulfilling some of our own Western humanitarian ideals. Because every Gethenian is a potential mother, the great disparity between male and female roles that we know so well does not occur on Gethen. This means that “anyone can turn his hand to anything,” as a Hainish observer notes; gender-related limitations on careers or status do not exist. Furthermore, the sexual urge is so powerful that the Gethenians make special provisions for those in “‘kemmer’—estrus—to be together to give free expression to their drives. This means in turn, as the Investigator Ong Tot Oppong says, “There is no unconsenting sex, no rape” (94).

This social situation adds up to a telling comment on being human. Here is a race whose estrus cycle and sex drive are like those of animals yet whose alien androgyny—a true androgyny—means that they have surpassed us in achieving a society free of sex-related crimes and stigma. Surely, if complex social behavior and altruism are definitive human characteristics, the Gethenians have a fair claim to being human.

Then where do they stand? Are they human? LeGuin’s greatness as a novelist partially hinges on the fact that she often poses fundamental questions, then does not offer easy answers; in fact she may not answer at all. As to whether Gethenians are human, there are answers of sorts, but they give little satisfaction in terms of a simple yes or no. Ong Tot Oppong theorizes that the Gethenians are the result of ancient Hainish experiments that attempted to raise a Terran colony to nobler status by eliminating individual debasement because of gender. This means that the Gethenians may be another species of genus *Homo*, but like the Eloi and the Morlocks they might not be quite human in other terms.

One aspect of their social lives is superior to ours, although other
aspects are backward; so engaged are they in a struggle for survival that their technology and social structures are primitive and static. One could say such a thing about chimpanzees, and not so long ago our own ancestors had doubts about the fully human status of people they considered socially, technologically, and physically primitive; some people still have such doubts. Genly Ai and Estraven, LeGuin's Hainish and Gethenian protagonists in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, settle the issue of Gethenian humanity in a way when they disregard all cultural and biological barriers to become firm, mutually respecting friends. As with R2-D2, C-3PO, Weena, and Spock, humanness in this case seems to be a function of what characters emotionally accept as human. Certainly one of the most important lessons in LeGuin's novels is that humanity is a broader, deeper entity than we ordinarily think and that the definition of humanity requires constant expansion as our experience broadens.

Because of this theme, LeGuin's work risks being polemical and sentimental, but her best work exploits it beautifully. *The Word for World Is Forest* is obvious and righteous, but *The Left Hand of Darkness* integrates its lesson so thoroughly with Gethenian culture, biology, and geography that, like *Dune*, the main theme is too rich to be sentimental, no matter how uplifting it may sound when abstracted. *The Dispossessed* completely avoids the dangers of sentimentality and righteousness; rather than demonstrating that humanity is a broader concept than we realize, it approaches mainstream work by inverting the question of what is human.

This excellent novel takes the position that all its characters, Terrans, Hainish, and Cetians—the people of Urras and Anarres—are human, and doubts to the contrary seem small-minded. Conventional science fiction devices, interstellar travel and earthlike planets, here put human beings in a situation in which they encounter what are clearly other humans. Though the three main human cultures are strikingly different in some ways, they are strikingly similar in others, and, by appearance as well as major aspects of behavior, Terrans, Hainish, and Cetians are human, living pretty much within the standards of twentieth-century Western culture.

Those same science fiction conventions also create conditions in which characters have reason to speculate about human origins and humanness. Their histories have lost the early human connections, and indeed the reader has no hard historical evidence to substantiate that the three races are human. Thus we have a situation in which we can ask, 'these people seem to be human; as such, how do they behave, and what does their behavior mean?'' With this question we almost return to Homer, Shakespeare, and Goethe, yet we remain in the realm of science fiction as well.

Within this subtle situation LeGuin delineates a profound theme. The people of Anarres, anarchists who have migrated from Urras to establish
their own utopian, thoroughly communistic society, call the Urrasti “profi-
teers,” a scornful term for capitalists and private propertarians. Though
the Anarresti know that the Urrasti are human, they fall victim to the
propensity we know too well of assigning a derogatory, dehumanizing
name to those they dislike. Shevek, LeGuin’s Anarresti protagonist and
one of modern fiction’s great characters, transcends Anarresti bias by do-
ing the unthinkable—living among the profiteers.

The Urrasti by our lights are human, so they have the full range
of strengths and weaknesses we would expect, and their basic human
nature does not seem different from that of the Anarresti. But Urras’
geography allows wealth and privileges Anarres could never support; con-
sequently, Urrasti culture is so different from Anarres’ that Shevek, the
first Anarresti visitor in the 170 years since the anarchist emigration, is
regarded on Urras as the “moon man.” Hence the novel moves from
dehumanizing someone by assigning a derogatory name to a situation
in which a human literally becomes a being from an alien planet, a true
alien in most Urrasti eyes.

Among Shevek’s Urrasti acquaintances, however, he is regarded as
an educated, scientifically accomplished human being, though a bit loutish
socially—he is a bright but human hick. Ironically, this same class of
educated people who scorn the distorted views of the masses is quick to
relegate the Hainish to nonhuman status though they are virtually in-
distinguishable physically from the Cetians and Terrans. Here lies one
of the great ironies of The Dispossessed. Whereas the masses of both planets
dehumanize each other with terms such as “profiteer” and “moon man,”
Shevek and his friends, Annaresti and Urrasti, attempt to transcend such
narrow views, but Shevek discovers that biased thinking can exist on a
different scale.

Between neighboring planets the charge of being nonhuman is for
the prejudiced, the unenlightened, against whom Shevek struggles so mov-
ingly, and he pins his hopes for a broader view of humanity on the more
varied, complex Urrasti society with its privileged scientific caste. Among
them, however, he merely finds the ante raised. Although they accept
Anarresti as fully human, he nevertheless finds bigotry raised to an in-
terstellar level and, worse, associated with dangerous, chauvinistic politics.
Talking to his Urrasti friend Atro, a great scientist and an influential
figure on Urras who has hitherto shown himself a great humanist about
Urrasti-Anarresti differences, Shevek discovers yet another misguided
human-human conflict. Atro says:

I mean by “Cetians” precisely what the daily paper writes and their lip-moving readers
understand by the term. Urras and Anarres. . . . A hundred years ago we didn’t need the
word. “Mankind” would do. But sixty-some years ago that changed. . . . My elder sister
called out the window, “They’re talking to somebody from Outer Space on the radio! . . .”
But it was only the Hainish, quacking about peace and brotherhood. Well, nowadays
"mankind" is a bit over-inclusive. What defines brotherhood but nonbrotherhood? Definition by exclusion, my dear! You and I are kinsmen... To know it, one only has to meet—to hear of—an alien. A being from another solar system. A man, so-called, who has nothing in common with us except the practical arrangement of two legs, two arms, and a head with some kind of brain in it! (114-115)

Shevek initially passes over this speech's illogical narrowmindedness, thinking it one of Atro's humorous spells, but is then surprised to find that Atro is serious. Though Shevek is tolerant and affectionate toward the old man, he recognizes a horrifying distortion of what made them friends. Atro's ready acceptance of Shevek as fully human is born of the same attitude that excludes Terrans and Hainish. Basically he defines humanity as Cetians, those inhabitants of his own solar system. The very basis of tolerance on one hand becomes the basis for bigotry on the other. Illogically, he excludes some races, though we must remember that there really is no acceptable proof for anyone in the novel that Cetians, Terrans, and Hainish are mutually human. Thus neither we nor Shevek should feel too righteous about Atro's narrow views; there is room for doubt.

Furthermore, Atro's motivation is completely recognizable. What could be more human than what he next tells Shevek:

I don't want those damned aliens getting at you through your notions about brotherhood and mutualism and all that. They'll spout you whole rivers about "common humanity" and "leagues of all the worlds" and so on, and I'd hate to see you swallow it. The law of existence is struggle—competition—elimination of the weak—a ruthless war for survival. And I want to see the best survive. The kind of humanity I know. The Cetians. You and I: Urras and Anarres. We're ahead of them now, all those Hainish and Terrans and whatever else they call themselves, and we've got to stay ahead of them. (115)

Though Shevek takes these ironies with good graces, he withholds from Atro further news of his work, a scientific theory with boundless political impact. Instead, he arranges for it to be broadcast everywhere as his gift for "the common good," a commonality based on the mutual humanity of three great cultures. At the novel's end he returns to Anarres, a failure in his effort to bridge the gap between his world and that of the propertarians; in both places virtually nothing has changed, but Shevek has made his gift to mankind, and in the final pages he achieves an ambiguous triumph that contains the potential for building among human cultures a sense of common humanity.

The ship that takes Shevek from Urras to Anarres is crewed by Terrans and Hainish. One Hainishman, Ketho, is a minor character in the novel's action but a major character thematically. In defiance of Anarresti laws Ketho wants to visit the anarchist planet, partly because it is his duty as a ship's officer to explore, but more, he hints, because he is personally interested in Anarresti culture. He has learned the language and read the works of Odo, Annares' principal ideologue, and may even
want to stay. In any event he will be the first outsider allowed on Anar-
res since the settlement and must accept, Shevek tells him, the risks of
being free: "Once you are there, once you walk through the wall with
me, then as I see it you are one of us. . . . You become an Anarresti,
with the same options as all the others. But they are not safe options.
Freedom is never very safe" (311).

"One of us"—Conrad's Marlow uses these words to describe Lord
Jim's humanity and role within the alien culture in which he finally
recovers his integrity. By consenting to Ketho's accompanying him Shevek
assaults the wall—the book's opening image—that keeps apart not just
Anarresti and Urrasti but Cetians on the one hand and Terrans and
Hainish on the other. The last two have long since accepted each other.
What remains is for Ketho and Shevek to lead the Cetians through a
wall that finally exists only in their own minds. They may or may not
succeed, but their effort redefines humanity nobly.

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