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The Million Dollar Question

It is, in all likeliness, a fact that the reader of this paper has taken it for granted that the writer is a human. It is also quite probable that the reader views him or herself as human. But what, exactly, constitutes being a human? What is the special ingredient required to make a human? Some push for metacognition, or the ability to think about one’s thoughts, while most argue biology as the key characteristic.

The question of the definition of the word “human” is one that has yet to be fully and universally answered. The quest to discover this definition is the purpose and the bane of many philosophers’ lives. However, as humans strive to find this perfect definition, it seems that they forget that the world around them is changing at a rapid rate, and thus they are, too, in order to meet the new demands of life. This is evident when it comes to technological advances in society. As technology becomes a more integral part of human lives, the search for the definition of human must take a different path, as humans are not a sole entity, but now part of a larger machine.

Many pieces of literature, especially in the science fiction genre, offer suggestions as to how humans may define their being as technology changes. William Gibson’s Neuromancer is a prime example of this. As one reads Neuromancer by William Gibson, he or she sees in what ways the current definitions of “human” must change as humans become physically and mentally dependent on machines, as well as what effects this may have on the future.
As technology advances, humans turn to more physical reliability on the technology that surrounds them, to the point where they almost become cyborg instead of human. In his book *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence*, author Andy Clark argues that the human brain was created for the purpose of connecting with external sources to help accomplish a task. Clark says that human minds connect with "nonbiological circuitry," and thus become more cyborg. It is because of this that we are able to merge our mental tools with our new physical tools (3-6). If Clark says that by expanding their mind humans interlink with technology, they are not wholly biological creatures anymore, which disbands one critical characteristic in the current, unofficial definition of human.

In *Neuromancer*, the world is completely overrun with technology to the point where the body has become a sort of cage. Gibson says on page 6, "The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh." The body, without any prosthetics or enhancements, is a cage. It restricts a person from achieving his or her full potential. Without any sort of machine being added to the flesh, a person is incomplete. The advancements, on the other hand, complete a person, bringing out all sides of them and keeping them from being degraded. One of Case's partners, Molly, says to Case on page 25,

"'Cept I do hurt people sometimes, Case. I guess it's just the way I'm wired' . . . She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four centimeter scapel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails. She smiled. The blades slowly withdrew."

In Molly's case, her physical enhancements reflect her personality, almost bringing it to completion. It also keeps her from being degraded by her peers. No one is going to mess with her
If they know she has the power to do harm to them. The additions to Molly’s flesh free her from the limitations of her natural body.

It is not the point of this paper to argue whether or not it is morally right to enhance one’s body but to argue that the human body is becoming less biological and more machine. Thus, humans must change one of the ways they define the word “human.” As prosthetics and other additions to the body become more popular in society, in order to include all humans in the definition of the word “human,” the definition of human must move away from a solely biological base.

Humans are not just becoming physically dependent on machines; they are also becoming mentally dependent. If a person is mentally reliant on technology, he or she is also turning away from a biologically based definition. According to a study conducted by Dr. Susan Moeller and the University of Maryland, college students from ten countries on five continents reported feelings of depression, anxiety, and withdrawal when asked to spend a day without their phones. Many students said that media had become an extension of themselves. Without it, they felt like they had lost an integral part of themselves (“the world UNPLUGGED”). Technology has evolved into such an important part of society that even if it is not physically connected to the human body, it still seems like an addition to the brain. Without it, humans increasingly feel lost and without a sense of direction. In addition, in some instances, such as the aforementioned study, going without media in particular creates a feeling of a loss of purpose.

Case, in Neuromancer, is addicted to technology. Although it is the basis of his job, technology has turned into his only sense of purpose. When it is taken away from him, Case feels withdrawal symptoms. Gibson describes Case’s situation:
"A year here and he still dreamed of cyberspace, hope fading nightly. All the speed he took, all the turns he’d taken and the corners he’d cut in Night City, and still he’d see the matrix in his sleep... he’d cry for it, cry in his sleep... trying to reach the console that wasn’t there.” (4-5)

Case craves the ability to jack into the matrix like an addict. Even subconsciously in his sleep, his mind is yearning for the matrix. Because his mind relies so heavily on the matrix, it is a part of him. When it is missing, Case is not fully himself. The technology is a part of his mind, even if it is not always physically connected to his body.

Mental reliance on technology is as important to consider as physical dependency when looking at how to define “human.” If a person’s mind is interconnected with media to the point where it cannot operate at its maximum level without it, that person is leaning towards becoming more robotic as someone who is wearing a prosthetic arm. Therefore, as humans become more unable to forgo the use of technology, this dependency must be taken into consideration when trying to define “human.”

Whether or not humans decide to consciously change and how they decide to change the generally accepted definition of “human” as technology progresses will have a great effect on the future. Valerie Renegar and George Dionisopolous argue in their article “The Dream of a Cyberpunk Future?” that Gibson in Neuromancer writes a social critique of the current world and of the world humans might create if they do not change their present course (337). In Neuromancer, the word “human” is a degrading, exclusive term because it never evolved as humans and technology did. “Human” becomes a bad word because it only applies to biology in a world where most people are in some way dependent on technology. Gibson writes on page 203,
“Power, in Case's world, meant corporate power. The zaibatsus, the multinationals that shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers. Viewed as organisms, they had attained a kind of immortality.” Those who do not have access to such power or enhancements are lesser. It is a repetition of the horrors that can already be seen in the present day. A person’s worth in Neuromancer is not reliant on the fact that he or she is a living being but on how much power that he or she has and whether or not he or she has enhancements.

Even though Neuromancer is a “comic perspective” that expands on the current trajectory of society, as Renegar and Dionisopoulos state on page 334 of their article, there is still hope. Humans have the ability to take a step back and examine the common conceptions about the definition of the term “human,” the rapid pace at which technology is advancing, and how these two factors may affect the future. The future Gibson describes in Neuromancer does not have to be the future of humanity. However, a different outcome is only possible if humans consciously decide to change their interpretation of “human” to be all inclusive.

Although there is no concrete definition of the word “human,” it is widely accepted that the definition has a biological foundation. However, as humans advance and become less biological and more technological, both physically and mentally, humans must change their definition of “human.” Otherwise, man-and-womankind runs the risk of creating the future that William Gibson depicts in Neuromancer, where people who do not have access to technology are seen as lesser beings. In order to avoid this future, humans have to accept that they are becoming less human as technology becomes more human-like. Changing the interpretation of the term “human” would make it more inclusive to all who rely on technology, but also would incorporate those who choose to not depend on technology. While this million dollar question may be the bane
of philosophers' lives, the prospect of the future that humans could create makes it worth the struggle.
Works Cited


“the world UNPLUGGED.” *University of Maryland*, 2011,

Literary Analysis Peer Commentary Questions
(adapted from Analyzing Literature: A Guide for Students, by Sharon James McGee)

Writer’s Name: Allie Johnston
Reviewer’s Name: Ray Polvogt

1. Read through the draft once for a first impression. What is your overall impression of this draft after your initial reading?

   I think the idea is good but maybe could be a little clearer. Maybe explain “why?” more.

2. Now read the text again more slowly. In your own words, summarize the author’s main claim. Does the author “prove” his/her point by the end of the essay? Is this claim reasonable and logical given your understanding of the original literary text? Explain. Does the claim seem unfounded or completely off base? If so, why?

   The author is saying that due to more dependence and integration of humans with machines/technology, in definition of human, and what it includes needs to be expanded. Also she briefly shows how it may affect our future.

   I think it’s a good reasonable topic. She could use more proof or maybe not proof, but clearer, concise, vague statements... I'd like what I'm trying to say.
3. Does the writer use effective evidence from the story to support his/her claim? Are there places where more evidence is needed to support the claim? If so, note those places. Has the writer used the evidence appropriately? In other words, has the writer accurately reflected the text author’s intent? Have any quotes been taken out of context? Does the writer provide sufficient context for the quoted material to make sense?

Evidence is good. My only suggestion is nearly more context on pg 2 for yer Molly quote.

4. Is the paper logically organized? Do the points lead smoothly from one to the next? Are there any big leaps of logic that the writer makes? If so, where are they?

Yes, the paper flows from explaining the need for change and its definition to what changing (or not changing) that definition may lead to.

5. Has the writer integrated quotes into the text appropriately? If not, note spots where the writer needs to do more.

Quotes are good.

If anything may be another quote from Newsmaker in your 3rd point (effect on world) section.
6. Did the writer strike an effective balance between providing context for the evidence and plot summary? (Remember, an effective literary analysis does not rely on plot summary.)

Yes, there is not much plot summary but enough evidence from the book to support claims.

7. Has the writer followed MLA documentation appropriately?

I believe so.

8. What suggestions do you have for this writer to improve the literary analysis?

Read through it a few times and think about what you are trying to say and make a clear, concise sentence for each point to clarify to readers if they get lost in evidence.

Just clarification. I got lost a little on and maybe write a definition of flumm in your paper to refer back to.