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Are We Already Posthuman? A Study of Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome*

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Abstract

Since we are living in the age of modern technology in its various shapes, one feels it is important to discuss what is posthuman meant by being a posthuman. This study is going to apply some of the features on Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome* (2003) to investigate the belief that we, as humans, are already posthuman now and we do not need to wait for the future to be posthuman. This study attempts to apply posthuman concepts to the selected play, drawing on the work of Cary Wolfe, Ihab Hassan, Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, Hans Moravec, and Thomas Carlson. The paper is going to identify the archetypal figure of digital culture – the posthuman subject – within a dramatic form. The recent study tends to explore the effect of the digital technology in the humanist paradigm as well as the dichotomy in the self that occurs as a result of the integration with intelligent machines.

The Sugar Syndrome is a posthuman play due to the characters' relationship with the internet. In fact, about half of the nine scenes in the first act of the play are online, whether partly or completely, shifting between the virtual and material world through the internet. The characters, in this play, are multidimensional as what they appear to be is different from their inner self, which their interaction with technology helps to disclose. The model of identity represented in *The Sugar Syndrome*, reveals the characters to be subjugated to factors that are heterogeneous and collective rather than singular and self-conscious, which are integrated with the intelligent machines. The main characters can be viewed as posthuman subjects as they represent a cyborgic unity between the digital code and unwanted desires of the flesh. In this sense, this play tends to assert the idea that we, as humans, are posthuman through our consolidation with the technology, machines, and the accelerating digital world, and we do not want to wait for the future to be nominated as posthumans.

Keywords:

Technology, Posthumanism, Lucy Prebble, Cyborg, Internet, *The Sugar Syndrome*.

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Since we are living in the age of modern technology in its various shapes, one feels it is important to discuss what is meant by being a posthuman. This study is going to apply some of the posthuman features on Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome* to investigate the belief that we, as humans, are already posthuman now and we do not need to wait for the future to be posthuman. The paper is going to identify the archetypal figure of digital culture – the posthuman subject – within a dramatic form. The recent study tends to explore the effect of the digital technology in the humanist paradigm as well as the dichotomy in the self that occurs as a result of the integration with intelligent machines. The paper attempts to investigate whether the digital environment establishes a conflict between a humanist and a posthumanist worldview.

Before dealing with the term posthumanism, we shall in advance realize what is meant by humanism in order to fully understand it. Humanism, as Cary Wolfe puts it, "is a broad category of ethical philosophies that affirm the dignity and worth of all people, based on the ability to determine right and wrong by appeal to universal human qualities particularly rationality" (xi). Wolfe adds: "[the posthuman] unsettles the very foundations of what we call 'the human'" (69). Hence, Rosi Braidotti asserts that the posthumanist perspective "rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes further in exploring alternatives . . . It works instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject" (37). J. A. Cuddon suggests:

Postumanism denotes a philosophical position concerned with reconceptualizing what it means to be human. Posthumanism refutes all ideas of naturalness, and denies the existence of a transcendent 'human nature' asserted by humanism. However, posthumanists share with humanists a commitment to progress and a respect for science and rationality... Indeed, the concept of the posthuman is more or less coterminous with that of Donna Haraway's 'cyborg'. (551-552)

In 1977, Ihab Hassan wrote an article which turns out to be the first occurrence of the word "posthumanism". In "Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture", Hassan states:

We need first to understand that the human form—including human desire and all its external representations — may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. . . . We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism. (843)

The humanist approach to make man the dominator of all the other species, treating him as the center of the universe, is coming to an end. Posthumanism implies an overlap between the humans and technology.

Kathrine Hayles argues that "a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature" (288). Posthumanism does not necessitate the end of humanity, it rather abolishes certain human concepts that work in favor of the group of humans who had "the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice" (286). Hayles tends to assert that "the posthuman evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means" (285).

Hayles also advocates that Posthumanism implies an intensive and multifaceted human fusion with intelligent machines to the extent that it is "no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed" (35). In order for humans to be posthumans, from Hayles's point of view, they must go through changes and transformation which will never be complete or "sharp breaks; without exception, they reinscribed traditional ideas and assumptions even as they articulated something new". Hayles also suggests, as the title of her book *How We Become Posthuman?* instigates, that the transition from humanity to posthumanity will be led by us as, "people become posthuman because they think they are posthuman"(6). The technological revolution is an intrinsic component in the realization of posthumanity. Hayles further illustrates that technology has participated in the creation of new notions of identity and subjectivity which will help to define the posthuman ontology. Nevertheless, the advancements of technology are not going to be the only driving force beyond the existence of the posthuman entity. The influences that technology stamps upon humanity will allow for the possibility of a posthuman object. It is widely accepted that people carry out the development of technologies as they cannot be developed by themselves.

In her famous Manifesto for Cyborgs, published for the first time in 1984, Donna Haraway adopts a line of thinking analogous to Hayles' in exploring a literal representation of a posthuman figure: "the cyborg". She defines a posthuman entity, or cyborg, as an entity that has overcome the limitations of biology, neurology, and psychology to move away from the constraints of race and gender. For her, a posthuman text is one which clearly reinforces the act of searching for answers away from human physical and psychological limitations. The posthuman is a beacon of hope, the cyborg, and the offspring of the military-industrial complex that has the capacity to destroy the binaries that created it (149). She further illustrates that "by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics"(150). The cyborg design of Haraway, very similar to what many

posthumanists today call the posthuman, is, in fact, a being questioning the dualisms that are found in Western thought:

Late-twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. . . .The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically. (152)

Moreover, Hans Moravec defends the transition of human personalities to machines capable of achieving more physical strength and intellectual expansion than the usual human body always hoping that mankind will be able to defy the limitations of age and time and to gain immortality in this way. He also argues that, in the next fifty years, human race will evolve into a new species and will have true different descendants which are the robots, "a machine that can think and act as a human, however inhuman it may be in physical or mental detail". Moravec further adds that such thinking "machines could carry on our cultural evolution, including their own construction and increasingly rapid self-improvement, without us, and without the genes that built us," creating a "post biological world" which they dominate (2).

The idea of posthumanism has developed nowadays. A cyborg model has gone far to include any one who is dealing with the various means of modern technology. Human beings in the late twentieth century have become cyborgs. Hayles argues: "as you gaze at the flickering signifiers scrolling down the computer screens, no matter what identifications you assign to the embodied entities that you cannot see, you have already become posthuman"(xiv). Referring to this idea, Seda Ilter says:

Posthumanism is not simply about prosthesis, literal cyborgs, humanoid robots or science fiction. Rather, . . .it refers to the (re)construction of identity through the subject's interaction with and exposure to the highly technologised and media-saturated environment. 'Becoming posthuman' means going beyond the boundaries of the so-called human and furthering the sense of subjectivity, not only through the extension of the material body beyond the borders of the organic skin, but also through the expansion of consciousness and cognition. That is, one becomes posthuman once one uses the internet, socializes through Facebook, or feeds information into online systems such as Wikipedia. (128)

Thomas Carlson defines a "posthuman mode of being" as:

a techno-scientific existence that extends and reshapes the powers of human thought, agency, and imagination (via informational, communications, and other media technology) even as it alters the boundaries and character of human and other life (thanks to biological sciences and technologies, genetic engineering, and the like). (15)

Carlson further advocates that humans have evolved into posthumans due to the massive amount of digital technologies in the twenty-first century, which have facilitated the creation of a new posthuman paradigm. Carlson also focuses on the ideas of French philosopher Michel Serres, who argues that the subject's relationship with the wider world has been reconfigured through the integral existence of digital technologies, satellite networks, mobile communications, and cyberspace. Serres writes that "we are losing our finitude in demonstrable ways ...undoing the boundaries of subject and object, the borders of life and death, and the kinds of spatial and temporal limits that have long defined us" (qtd. in Carlson 141). Depending on this notion, "the human ' itself ' likewise grows increasingly difficult or even impossible to locate clearly or define securely" (Carlson 141). Hence, a posthuman subject, from the perspective of Richard Jordan, is "a biological human who equates, compares, or models their identity with networked, intelligent machines, such that cognition comes to both mirror and co-evolve with a digital infrastructure" (25).

There are some posthuman aspects that should accumulate together, or, at least, some of them must be there for a literary work to be called or to fall under the category of posthumanism. There is, for instance, the posthuman landscape which can be, in other words, a community in which humans and technology are mingled together. A posthuman play focuses on the subject not the machine. So, digital spectacles, including the online confrontations, are not literally represented onstage, they are implied in such technological cues as the dialogue, sound, lightening and movement which help in creating the digital environment that the author wants for moving from a physical to a virtual space and vice versa. A posthuman play investigates the effect of the post on the human in the digital age. It tends to examine what occurs as a result of the equation of the human with the machine resulting in posthuman bodies or communities. It is not a must that a posthuman body be a cyborg, in its old sense, or something that is technologically modified. A posthuman body is one which is in some way liberated from human restraints such as time or gender. This liberation frequently consists of some kind of technological modification, although it does not always have to involve mechanical aspects. The posthuman, as Haraway points out when discussing the cyborg, allows for a post body state of existence in which limiting binaries are deconstructed. A posthuman character is a collection of more than one self in a way which indicates that

there is a split within the virtual and material component of one character (149).

Lucy Prebble is a British playwright. She was born in 1980, to a father who works for a software company, and a mother who is a state school teacher. She lived in Haslemere, Surrey. She was first educated at Guildford High School, then she studied English at the University of Sheffield where she wrote her first play, *Liquid*, and won the PMA Most Promising Playwright Award. Later on, she wrote *The Sugar Syndrome* (2003), for which she won the George Devine Award, *The Effect* (2012), which won the 2012 Critics' Circle Award for Best Play, and *ENRON* (2009), which won her an Olivier Award nomination for Best New Play. Lucy was the creator of *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, a TV series produced in 2007, which was sold to Showtime, the major US channel famed for its daring dramas.

The Sugar Syndrome is one of the first plays of the twenty-first century to explore posthuman themes. The play premiered at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in October 2003. It has won several awards and as of 2009 has been sold in seven languages. It is a play about a teenager at the age of 17, whose name is Dani, a recovering bulimic, who likes to chat with people on the internet. Dani chats with different men: Lewis, who is 22, discovers that he loves and cares for her and tries to come near her throughout the play. Dani pretends to be an 11 year-old-boy and chats with Tim, a 38 year-old-man, who has once been convicted and put in jail for raping young children. They later meet each other and he finds out about her being a girl. They develop a friendship and talk together about personal aspects of their lives. Tim has been careful with Dani, covering some facts about his life at first, then he feels relief in her presence, which leads him to open up to her revealing his hidden facts. Dani tells Tim about her eating disorder, her hatred of the university, and her parents as well as their imminent divorce. It is not until the end of the play, when Tim gives her his laptop that Dani discovers that she has been putting herself in troubles through her relationship with Tim that's why she seeks relief in connecting with her mother and regaining the love she has once rejected.

Prebble, in *The Sugar Syndrome*, shows aspects of posthumanism such as the use of modern technology in relation to humans. Modern technology has become part and parcel of our daily activities. *The Sugar Syndrome* is a posthuman play due to the characters' relationship with the internet which is a sort of artificial intelligence. The characters' interaction with the internet is seen throughout the play. The internet, "ageless and omnipresent", as Jordan describes it, has a speaking role in two scenes in the play and its presence is felt throughout the play (50). On the one hand, Dani uses the internet to escape the miserable life she lives; moving from one place to another, which does not make her able to make friends, not enjoying the love and the company of her father who is careless about her,

sending her money for the private school, but is not present physically in her life, working in London and having an affair with a woman there. On the other hand, Tim uses the internet to practice his socially unacceptable desires. Through the characters' chatting on the internet, the inner and outer conflict of the characters becomes clear to the readers. The internet knows more about the characters than they know about each other. The characters' relation with the technology represented in the internet remains unconscious; which means that they are not aware of. It witnesses Lewis' love to Dani which remains a secret between them at the beginning.

Lewis . . . I think you're lovely. Sometimes I want to smash your face in, like now, to remind you I'm here, but I think you're lovely. Will you not just write a little? Just to keep me going? Cos I just keep imagining what you could be doing and it's sending me mental. I'm sorry but it is. I miss you. . . .

He sighs.

Internet Save as draft. (64)

When Lucy Prebble represents technology on the stage, she prefers form to spectacle, in spite of the central role that the presence of the internet plays throughout the play. Her stage directions illustrate that "the set should remain spare and non-naturalistic throughout. The locations should be evoked by space, detail, and lighting rather than replicated. Cyberspace in particular needs not be naturalistically portrayed with screens and computers *etc.* (26). During some of the turning points of the plot, Prebble intends to break the borders between the online and offline encounters of the characters. In fact, about half of the nine scenes in the first act of the play are online, whether partly or completely, shifting between the virtual and material world through the internet, using the sound effects of "*Bing*" or "*The scream of a modem dialling up,*" referring to discrete boundaries being crossed (27).

The first meeting between Dani and Tim sets the posthuman landscape of the play which is an anonymous chatroom. Dani, who logs in as (Dani Boy), tricks Tim by pretending to be a boy and succeeds to attract his affection towards her, depending on the information that appears on the computer screen.

Dani and Tim in a chatroom.

Tim: Do you like football? Who are your favourite players?

Dani: I don't like football. I'm always in goal.

Tim: Has your dad taken you to any big matches?

Dani: He's not around much.

Tim: That's a shame. Does that make you sad?

Dani: (*slightly amused*) Not really, no. (32)

This setting recalls the Turing Test, made to assert that "the gender and the human/machine examples are meant to prove the same thing," in which there are three rooms; in the first room there is a woman,

the second room has a man and the third contains a computer (Hayles xiii). They communicate electronically and the man has to find out which room contains the woman and which one has the computer, or, in other words, which conversation is the human and which is the machine. The test, as Hayles has noted, makes

the crucial move of distinguishing between *the enacted body*, present in the flesh on one side of the computer screen, and *the represented body*, produced through verbal and semiotic markers in an electronic environment. This construction necessarily makes the subject into a cyborg, for the enacted and represented bodies are brought into conjunction through the technology that connects them. (xiii)

Hayles suggests that there can be a "disjunction" between the enacted and the represented bodies as the man may fail to distinguish between the responses of the woman and the computer in the same way that Tim is convinced that Dani is an 11-year-old boy which is the represented body and does not recognize her enacted body as a girl. Dani is also surprised when she sees Tim for the first time in the park, as his enacted body is different from what she has imagined him, as she discovers that he is younger and "posh" (35).

There is even a crack that occurs between the virtual and material concept within one character. Dani pretends to be a boy, which she believes is the ideal represented body for her, while Tim escapes in his represented body from his real life and his enacted body, which he believes to be wrong. Thus, in the first encounter between Tim and Dani, they are presented to the audience as material/virtual cyborgs as their enacted bodies perform their represented ones before us. Their conversation divides the humanistic element from the posthuman represented in digital environment. In this sense, Dani and Tim are no longer seen as coherent subjects, but are represented as a collection of the virtual and the material working individually. Dani is divided through the conflict between the online and offline personality, while Tim through the struggle between his unwanted, archived desires.

Throughout the play, we are encountered with the different versions of Dani's personality, which operate independently. Applying the above-mentioned posthuman subjectivity, she is seen as the daughter, the 11-year-old boy, the recovering bulimic and the sexual being. Dani, who has a sexual affair with Lewis, has no mutual understanding and is angry with her mother, is interested in Tim and opens her heart to him hoping that she could help him to recover. All of these characters are true of Dani from a posthuman perspective. The rebellious personality of the 11-year-old Dani, at the end of the first Act, leads her to quarrel with Lewis because of his refusal of the friendship she develops with a rapist, to leave her house after a fight with her mother, from whom she becomes highly distanced, after

finding about her father's affair seeking relief with Tim. Dani, dressed in the clothes of a school boy, accompanies Tim to a night club, in an effort to escape from the body she hates, the sex she no longer wants, and the daughter she does not wish to be. Thus, the internet has allowed her to explore a new personality unlimited by the humanist bounds of time, flesh, or morality helping her to flee from her physical self.

The same thing happens with Tim, who tries to archive his unwanted desires and suppress his demons through the internet. When he meets Dani he appears to be funny, kind, and someone who differentiates right from wrong, when she tells him about the man who has drawn his male organ in the school yard when she was younger, he says to her, "You should have told someone," then when she replies, "I thought all you lot would stick together," he answers, "No one normal likes to hurt anyone, certainly not children"(67). It is not until the end of the play that the pluralistic nature of Tim's character appears when he gives Dani his laptop as he is afraid because Lewis, who loves Dani and is jealous of their friendship, threatens him. The humanistic part of Tim who has pretended to be in control of his abnormality is buried now and the posthuman part is revealed, as Dani is at last encountered with a dark side of Tim's personality, the online self she has never met, although it has been referred to before. Tim's unwanted desires, represented in a sexual attraction to young children, have become cyborgic as he has tried hard to store them, after being prisoned for it, in an intelligent machine.

Yet, when Dani tells Tim how she has been terrified the time when she finds her father's porn magazines,

I couldn't get the picture out of my head of him, this big, cross man, going at it over these silly photos. . . . But I couldn't sleep cos some part of me thought when the magazines run out he'd come up those stairs. Because suddenly I didn't know my Dad anymore. Something controlled him. (67)

A connecting point between Tim and Dani is served by the cybernetic notion of "something controlled him," as it views Tim's sexual desires for children and Dani's eating disorders as being beyond their conscious control, which helps in understanding the dichotomy of mind between the human and the posthuman paradigms.

To sum up, the characters in this play are multidimensional as what they appear to be is different from their inner self, which their interaction with technology helps to disclose. The model of identity represented in *The Sugar Syndrome*, reveals the characters to be subjugated to factors that are heterogeneous and collective rather than singular and self-conscious, which are integrated with the intelligent machines. The main characters can be viewed as posthuman subjects as they represent a cyborgic unity between the digital code and unwanted desires of the flesh. In this sense, this play tends to assert the idea that we as humans are posthuman through our

consolidation with the technology, machines, and the accelerating digital world, and we do not want to wait for the future to be nominated as posthumans.

Eventually, the idea of posthumanism carries within it two dimensions that we must be aware of as humans. Posthumanity may have its positive and negative influence. The positive dimension is that humans will be freed from the borders of gender, mortality and the limitedness of the human mind. But some critics are still afraid of the negative influence that might accompany posthumanism, because it might lead to a sort of discrimination between the posthuman bodies which may be considered as superior to the other type which is the traditional form of human beings in its old form which might be considered as inferiors or they can enslave them or even try to put an end to the human race. Such notion will take us back to the inequalities that humans have always been suffering from in every epoch of the human history.

هل نحن فعلاً في طور ما بعد الإنسانية؟
دراسة لمسرحية لوسي بربل متلازمة السكر
أيمن إبراهيم الحلفاوي
المستخلص

إنه لمن الضروري أن يعي الفرد مفهوم "ما بعد الإنسانية" حيث يعيش الإنسان في عصر التكنولوجيا الحديثة. إذ تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تطبيق خصائص "ما بعد الإنسانية" على رائعة الكاتبة الإنجليزية لوسي بربل متلازمة السكر (٢٠٠٣)؛ وذلك لتوضيح تطور الفرد في العصر الحديث وتجاوزه من مرحلة الإنسانية إلى مرحلة ما بعد الإنسانية، وإنه ليس بحاجة إلى انتظار المستقبل ليصل إلى آفاق "ما بعد الإنسانية". وتقوم الدراسة بتطبيق آراء نقاد ما بعد الإنسانية، مثل كاري ولف، وإيهاب حسن، وكاثرين هايلز، ودون هاروي، وهانز مورفيك، وتوماس كارسون على مسرحية متلازمة السكر التي تعتبر مثالاً واضحاً للمسرح التكنولوجي في العصر الحديث.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

التقديم التكنولوجي للمسرح - ما بعد الإنسانية - لوسي بربل - سيبورج - متلازمة السكر

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