

English B: Extended Essay

Category 3

Title: The Roles of Different Perspectives in Understanding the Concept of Humanity through the Outsider Narrative in *The Humans*

Research question: To what extent does Matt Haig's *The Humans* tackle the concept of humanity with the perspective of an outsider?

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1.Introduction

In literature, humanity is a complex and ambiguous concept whose meaning varies according to an individual's perspective. The novel "The Humans" by Matt Haig offers different interpretations of what it means to be human through the shifting perspective of an outsider. By placing an alien narrator in a world entirely unfamiliar to it, Haig utilizes the perspective of an outsider to encourage the reader to reflect on different aspects of human life. The novel can be divided into three sections with every section representing a different perspective on the concept of humanity. In the first section, the outsider's perspective is shaped by pure logic like its species, which emphasizes intellectual purity and avoidance of emotional influence. In the second section, the outsider's perspective begins to shift as the outsider immerse itself in human life. The outsider's change in perspective is influenced by the experiences the outsider gains as well as the literature and music it consumes. The new perspective of the outsider now represents the emotional viewpoint of the humanity. Finally, in the third section, the outsider develops a convergence of the preceding perspectives, recognizing the importance of both for achieving a more complete understanding of the concept of humanity.

This essay will first examine the use of the outsider perspective in literature, its strengths and limitations, and how Matt Haig constructs and utilizes this perspective in *The Humans*. Secondly, Haig employs different kinds of perspectives to highlight different aspects of human life, each contributing uniquely to the exploration of the concept of humanity. Therefore, each perspective will be examined through distinct frameworks, initially focusing on the logical perspective and its critique of human concepts such as behaviour and social systems, then examining how the outsider's initial logical viewpoint shifts toward a more emotional understanding, and ultimately considering what the outsider learns through the combination of these perspectives and what this suggests about humanity. Accordingly, this essay will address the question: "To what extent does Matt Haig's *The Humans* tackle the concept of humanity with the perspective of an outsider?"

2.The Use of an Outsider Perspective in Literature

In literature, the outsider perspective is a narrative tool which is used for criticising and presenting the reader with a wide range of ideas that is present in aspects of life that often remain unquestioned or disregarded. By placing a character in an unfamiliar environment, authors allow readers to see how behaviours, rules, and beliefs might appear to someone who

does not have prior understanding of them. Because the outsider is detached from the social norms and rules of an unfamiliar setting, their confusion and curiosity encourage the reader to reevaluate ingrained beliefs. Gouthro and Holloway note that in fiction, characterization and the nuances in language “can successfully engage learners in deeper levels of cultural analysis,” (Gouthro and Holloway, 2) suggesting that outsider perspectives compel readers to question assumptions about norms and behaviours. However, this approach is not only limited to an outsider who lacks prior understanding or experience; it can be someone who has a very different perspective compared to other people around him/her. Additionally, the lens of an unfamiliar observer allows the audience to emphasise the shifting perspective. As the outsider learns to criticize the world around them, the narrative reveals the sources and the reasoning behind his/her evolving ideas, allowing readers to follow and understand the development of their perspective better which heavily relies on the empathy of the reader to the outsider. Despite its narrative strength, using an outsider perspective in literature may also introduce certain limitations. For instance, sometimes the ideas of the outsider can appear forced or overly structured when the character is portrayed only as a narrative device to show the author’s ideas, rather than developing through an organic roadmap of logical reasoning. Making the narrative risk resembling an essay or commentary rather than a cohesive and immersive story. Such execution will undermine the narrative itself, as the effectiveness of using the outsider perspective critically relies on the readers’ empathy for the outsider’s reasoning. Moreover, according to Billmeyer, the narrative voice and perspective “develops and consequently limit the reader’s view of the fictional world and thereby” (Billmeyer) shapes what the reader can know about the story through that perspective. This suggests that a narrow or restricted narrative viewpoint can constrain the reader’s access to broader events and insights beyond the focal character’s knowledge.

In *The Humans*, Matt Haig employs the outsider perspective through an alien narrator who temporarily inhabits a human body, forcing it to observe human behaviour in order to blend into society. By blending the alien’s purely logical mode of reasoning with the emotionally driven perspective of humans together Haig critiques and exposes the irrationality and deeply ingrained assumptions that shape human life. In the preface of the novel, Matt Haig not only establishes the tone of the story, but also hints at how the readers’ attitude should be while reading a book that includes an outsider perspective. Using rhetorical questions: “let us consider this: what if there actually is a meaning to human life? And what if -humour me- life on Earth is something not just to fear and ridicule but also cherish? What then?” (Haig, p.x) Haig

encourages the reader to question the meaning of the human life, setting a tone of persistent questioning that the reader must adopt in order to fully understand the outsider's viewpoint presented in the novel. Moreover, Haig advises the reader to set aside their own biases and be open-minded before engaging with the story: "Let us open our minds entirely, for what you are about to read will need every prejudice you may have to stand aside in the name of understanding"(Haig, p.x) In short, Haig establishes the ideal approach for readers to understand his ideas through the perspective of the outsider, indicating that the readers should remain curious, ask questions and stay open-minded.

3.Perspective of Logic

3.1 The Source of Perspective of Logic

In *The Humans*, the alien narrator's initial understanding of humanity is shaped entirely by the instructions given by the Hosts and by the lifestyle prior to coming to earth. The Hosts constantly remind the outsider to "stay pure" during its mission. For the outsider's species being pure means remaining entirely logical, untouched by any emotional influence. The Hosts' concern about the narrator's potential "corruption", being impure, is reflected in the warnings they give to the outsider: "remember during your mission, never to become influenced or corrupted," (Haig, 46) a command that frames human emotions as a direct threat to intellectual integrity. The repetition of the command to "stay pure" therefore functions as both a thematic foundation and a narrative constraint, shaping the narrator's initial perspective of humanity before he has any lived experience to challenge it. Initially, as the protagonist was sent to Earth, it constantly compares the new knowledge and experiences it gains with its prior lifestyle. Because of the species' advanced technologies, called "gifts," they do not face problems related to food, as they can produce it without any material; knowledge, since they can ingest pills that provide information instantly; or maintenance, as they are constantly cared for by the systems they have created which makes them immortal. This unchallenging life prevents the species from relating to concept of being mortal, being able to live with the uncertainty of survival and the priorities that come with being human, since they do not face the same concerns as humankind. Moreover, Haig's use of the word "gifts" emphasizes that the outsider's abilities are inherited from its species rather than earned; reflecting the outsider's position as a young member of its species who couldn't contribute to the species development of the gifts, as they predate the outsider existence. For this reason, the outsider can be interpreted as a character who accepted the perspective of logic without questioning it and never feeling any emotions,

to be able to say that feeling emotions is being impure. This is an example of situational irony, as Haig uses the outsider's initial perspective to critique aspects of human life that remain unquestioned; it would be expected that the outsider itself also questions its perspective, yet it blindly accepted the beliefs imposed by its Hosts. Thus, the Hosts' strict emphasis on purity and its untroubled past life intensify its unquestioned logical perspective, leaving him perplexed when confronted with the emotional, social, and existential realities that shape the concept of humanity.

3.2 Concept of Humanity from a Perspective of Logic

Irony functions as a literary device that highlights "the contrast between what seems to be and what is" (Glatch, 1), helping writers show their ideas through differences between what readers expect and what actually happens, or when readers know something that a character does not. In the novel, irony functions as a central narrative device to portray the concept of humanity through the lens of an outsider. Haig primarily employs dramatic and situational irony, created through the alien narrator's ignorance of human norms and its literal, hyper-rational interpretations of everyday behaviour. This ironic distance causes familiar aspects of human life to appear irrational or puzzling with an illogical perspective. By filtering human behaviour through a purely logical consciousness, Haig uses irony to expose contradictions within human social practices and value systems that often go unquestioned from an internal perspective.

3.2.1 Behaviour

Haig presents the outsider's observations as analytical commentary, using its confusion to expose how ordinary human behaviours appear irrational when judged purely through logic. As it deepens its understanding of the human world it realises that humans often fail to communicate openly or express their true emotions, Contrary to its expectation that they would be simple and easy to understand, because the outsider initially believed them as primitive. This is illustrated in the outsider's observation of human behaviour: "This was, I would later realise, a planet of things wrapped inside things. Food inside wrappers. Bodies inside clothes. Contempt inside smiles. Everything was hidden away." (Haig, 13) The outsider finds indirect communication and emotional concealment illogical and inefficient. Haig employs situational irony, since the outsider discovers that humans are far more complex than the outsider expected, highlighting its confusion when faced with social norms that humans accept instinctively. The items concealed within this listing further exemplify situational irony, as the outsider struggles

to comprehend practices such as food being wrapped in packaging or bodies being covered by clothes. This use of irony emphasizes the outsider's difficulty in perceiving the world solely through a logical perspective. Through this ironic portrayal of everyday human behaviour, Haig exposes how practices that appear natural and necessary to humans are rendered irrational when viewed through a purely logical outsider perspective.

3.2.1 Social systems

The outsider has difficulty understanding Andrew Martin, the human it has replaced, and therefore tries to align itself with Andrew's beliefs in order not to blow its cover. It begins questioning his family and friends so that it can better understand him. The outsider asks Andrew Martin's wife, Isabella what motivates him and she replies: "You will forever be sucking at a nipple that offers no milk." (Haig, 70) Dramatic irony emerges from this exchange, as readers understand that when Isabella says "you" she is referring to Andrew while the person standing before her is an alien. The phrase inside the irony contains a metaphor by comparing Andrew Martin's, like many humans', pursuit of glory and recognition to an act that yields no reward, emphasizing the futility and meaningless of this endeavour. This moment leads the outsider to question the irrationality of human social system; it doesn't understand how humans can sustain their existence while they are characterized by primarily self-centred behaviour, despite being significantly underdeveloped when compared to the outsider's own species. Moreover, the outsider describes humans as arrogant and greedy as "they care about nothing but money and fame. They do not appreciate mathematics for its own sake, but for what it can get them" (Haig, 106) From the outsider's perspective, mathematics is not a mere tool to simplify life but the essence of existence itself. The contrast between the perspectives of the alien species and the humans exposes how human social systems are structured to exploit knowledge for economic gain, reducing knowledge to its economic value. Haig uses this judgment of the outsider to critique an absurd aspect of concept of humanity: a society that prioritizes material gain over the pursuit of knowledge for personal development. Thus, social systems encourage selfishness and greediness when observed from a logical perspective.

4. The Concept of Humanity from an Emotional Perspective

In the second part of the novel, Haig marks a clear turning point in the outsider's perception of humanity. Whereas, the narrator initially interprets human life through a strictly logical lens, this section illustrates the factors that lead the outsider to adopt an emotional perspective,

initiating a shift in its own worldview of the concept of humanity. As previously mentioned, one of the limitations of using the outsider perspective as a narrative device is that the shift in the outsider's perspective can sometimes appear forced or overly structured. To prevent this, Haig employs the use of intertextuality and human experiences, elements drawn from everyday life, which creates a natural roadmap of the outsider evolving perspective. Writers often use intertextuality to deepen the narrative: "every text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another," (Genette, 1) suggesting that intertextual references allow authors to build layered meanings. Exposure to the different forms of art referenced by intertextuality shifts the outsider's perspective, enabling the outsider to develop a new understanding of concept of humanity that could not be reached using its initial logical perspective. The outsider understands that emotions, previously dismissed by the outsider as weaknesses or sources of corruption, are central to comprehend the concept of humanity. New perspective of the outsider allows it to appreciate humanity's contradictions, vulnerabilities and imperfections. As a result, the novel changes from an analytical critique of humans' behaviour and their society to a more empathetic exploration of what it means to be a human.

4.1 Literature and Music

Haig employs intertextuality– the literary technique of referencing other texts to create layered meaning–through references to poetry– particularly works of the poet Emily Dickinson–and music, especially the composition of Debussy to advance both the outsider's understanding of the concept of humanity and the readers' empathy for this evolving perspective. It reflects on the role of art in bridging this gap: "That is why they invented art: books, music, films, plays, painting, sculpture. They invented them as bridges back to themselves, back to who they are." (Haig, p.130) Through its inner monologue, the outsider considers how these creative forms act as tools that enable it to develop a deeper understanding of the concept of humanity, revealing aspects of human experience that could not be grasped logically.

Matt Haig employs poems of Emily Dickinson to demonstrate the outsider's source of construction of a more empathetic understanding of human emotions, since her poems explore themes such as hope, love and identity. Dickinson's work is characterized by its "intense emotional and intellectual energy" (Poetry Foundation) which enables the outsider to access the raw, unfiltered emotions of human life. Through engaging with poetry, the outsider begins to move away from a purely logical understanding of humanity and develop a more emotional

perspective, allowing it to better comprehend the concept of humanity. Matt Haig employs this new perspective to reveal aspects of humanity that remain inaccessible through logic alone.

Moreover, the outsider's encounter with music plays a crucial role in its perspective shift. When the outsider listens to *Clair de lune* by Debussy for the first time it finds beauty within the unpredictability of the melodies present in the music. The outsider struggles to explain the harmony in these sounds through a rational perspective. According to emotion theorists, music conveys emotion not merely as a single feeling but through "multiple layers of expression" (Daniel J. Levitin) that enable listeners to perceive complex emotional content. The outsider realizes that *Clair de lune* reflects humanity in some ways. It is complex often irrational yet beautiful. This emotional approach to life enables the outsider to appreciate the importance of using emotion to understand certain aspects of humanity, in this case human complexity. By linking the outsider's evolving perspective to influences such as art, Matt Haig constructs a developmental progression that appears natural to readers, as they can trace the origins of this transformation. By portraying the outsider's evolving perspective through art and lived experiences, Haig illustrates how this shift develops naturally. This portrayal explores humanity from different angles without the outsider's shifting perspective feeling illogical or forced, making the story more immersive for the reader.

4.2 Experiences

The experiences the outsider gains play an important role in shifting and deepening its understanding of humanity. According to a critical study "the alien navigates the complexities of human life—from familiar relationships to everyday emotions—it undergoes a transformation, gaining insights into the joys and sorrows intrinsic to humanity" (Sobrief, 1). One of the most significant of these experiences is the outsider's first encounter with mortality. The act of violence assigned to the outsider by Hosts becomes a turning point in the outsider's perspective, forcing it to confront emotional weight of human life. Initially, the outsider approaches the act with complete emotional detachment, viewing it as a simple and necessary task. However, witnessing the victim's desperate struggle and his wife's desperate cries become another lesson about the concept of humanity for the outsider, as this experience exposes human vulnerability and the instinct to survive. Haig starts to use words such as "nightmare," "stuck," and "die," (Haig, 96) which reveal the outsider's internal conflict. These words convey fear and helplessness which allows readers to experience the psychological weight of the outsider's

confrontation with mortality. Through these words Haig demonstrates the outsider's confusion and isolation, highlighting the outsider's struggle to comprehend the concept of humanity.

Experiencing mortality prompts the outsider to question itself. This shift is most clearly expressed with the use of rhetorical questioning: "Die. How did humans ever stomach that idea?" (Haig, 96) Through this question, the outsider reveals its growing sense of empathy while trying to understand the concept of humanity. Even though, the outsider does not share the same limitations as humans, as it has access to the "gifts" that grant immortality and eliminate the fear of death, it nevertheless attempts to understand how humans continue to live their lives despite their awareness of mortality. Previously, the outsider believed that humans could only sustain their lives through ignorance of mortality. However, this experience makes the outsider reevaluate that belief and reflect astonishment rather than superiority for humans, indicating a proof of its developed emotional comprehension.

Another significant experience the outsider gains is the realization that every person possesses a unique perspective shaped by their personal experiences and emotions which challenges the outsider's Hosts' overgeneralization of humanity as a uniform entity. This realization is subtly suggested in: "I asked her what it meant, for her, to be a human. I wanted to ask the whole world this question." (Haig, 230). This interaction functions as a significant authorial hint although these sentences appear casually within the outsider's daily life. It reveals that the outsider no longer seeks a generalised definition of humanity, but instead recognizes that being human holds a different meaning for each individual. This new approach to the concept of humanity marks a shift from the outsider's initial perspective, in which it judged humans according to the same logical scale.

5. The Concept of Humanity from an Integrated Perspective of the Outsider

Third section explores the outsider rejection of purely logical or purely emotional way of understanding the concept of humanity but instead recognizing the necessity of both. This realization helps the outsider achieve an integrated perspective which is unique to itself. Haig uses contrast as a central narrative device to expose the outsider's evolved understanding of the concept of humanity. Particularly, this is shown through the opposition between the Hosts, represented as the outsider's initial perspective, and the outsider. These contrasts between the outsider's initial and ultimate perspective allow the reader to evaluate the outsider's journey and where it leads. The outsider's realization is captured in the statement: "Listen, emotions have a

logic” (Haig, p.174) which directly contrasts with the beliefs of the Hosts and the outsider’s initial worldview. The phrase emerges during the outsider’s confrontation with the Hosts, emphasizing that their judgement of humanity was flawed. After ascertaining that emotions contain their own form of logic, the outsider understands that humans cannot be evaluated solely through a logical perspective nor an emotional one; rather combination of both logical and emotional perspective is essential to understanding the concept of humanity.

Ultimately, the outsider develops its own concept of humanity using both logical and emotional perspectives. Even though the outsider has seen and experienced the imperfections of human life and initially complained about them, it begins to consider that these flaws may in fact be an essential part of being human: “What happened in heaven? After a while, didn’t you crave flaws?” (Haig, 174) This rhetorical question marks a decisive understanding of the concept of humanity. The outsider starts to consider that lust, misunderstandings and even violence might be considered meaningful compared to a world where pain no longer exists. The idea of heaven functions as a symbol of the outsider’s former life, a life perfected by gifts that removed passion, imperfection and emotional instability which also meant the absence of suffering. While this existence appears flawless from a logical standpoint, Haig contrasts it with the emotional emptiness it produces.

The outsider’s most important realization is that imperfection and unpredictability are not failures of logic, but essential elements that give human life its richness, purpose and beauty. This idea is further emphasized through the metaphor in the phrase, “Didn’t light need shade?” (Haig, 174) which reflects the outsider’s newly developed understanding of happiness. In this metaphor, light represents perfection, happiness and a painless existence while shade symbolizes imperfection, emotional instability and suffering. Having experienced light with and without shade, the outsider is able to recognize that happiness gains meaning only through emotional contrast. Unlike the outsider, humans who have never experienced a life without “shade”, cannot fully perceive its value. Consequently, when the outsider attempts to articulate its realization to others, it is met with incomprehension, highlighting how Haig uses the outsider’s perspective to reveal ideas about the concept of humanity.

6.Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Humans* demonstrates that humanity cannot be understood from a single perspective. Haig uses the outsider’s change of perspectives—from pure logic to emotional understanding, and finally to a mix of both—to show that understanding people is a process

that requires time and being open-minded. Haig does not explain humanity directly. Instead, Haig shows readers how different perspectives understand humanity through irony, contrast, and the outsider's experiences. This approach helps readers feel and reflect on what it means to be human. Ultimately, Haig suggests that humanity is complex and cannot be reduced to a single idea. It is shaped by both reason and emotion, and by can be only understood from different points of view.

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