

3-27-2019

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Recommended Citation

Hansen, Hannah (2019) "What Makes Us Human?," *Forces*: Vol. 2019 , Article 100.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol2019/iss1/100>

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What Makes Us Human?

Hannah Hansen

In books we read, we are constantly judging attempts at making humans. These characters we “read to life.” Some we praise for their insight, their reality, their utter and stark humanity; and others we feel fall short. We describe characters as flat, as one-dimensional. These characters have failed to convince us; they don’t fit the bill; they don’t fit the trick of writing. They’re not people like us. They don’t see the world like we see it. What does it mean to be human? How do we define the thing we live? And how do we expect characters in any story to understand the true struggles of living a life day to day?

What I’ve found is that people and characters need motivation. We need to be able to ask the question, “Would we do what they do?” Often as plots progress with wild and fantastical situations and twists of circumstances, yet in these wild and twisted plots would we precede the same? They need to do things out of anger and love and hunger, they need to form relationships between themselves and other humans. Isolations and connections are diametrically opposed foes when we talk of storytelling techniques, yet a writer must capitalize on both. Characters must be well formed in their own skins, and yet still have moments of compulsion, tragedy, and maybe even fall into self pity from time to time. No man is an island, in a swept phrase of the times; no one can define humans based on simple connections.

Do characters need flaws? In my opinion we definitely define humans by what is not too perfect. Similar to perfection, humanity is found in glimpses, in moments of praise and decay, that some may define as young and vulnerable. We need our protagonist to mess up, to fall for misdirection and to fall fast for fatal flaws. But we also need hope, even if it is just occasionally.

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Santa Fe NM Maryanne Zamora

Hope guides humanity. In a society that seems to be losing it over the course of history, we turn to fiction and the written word to redefine what it is we are looking to see. Without hope that humanness we're all looking for would fall quite quickly. It is human to pick yourself back up from the trenches. It is admirable for humans to start again, to try to develop the life they once had. It is the most crucial part to any story, yet, it is hardest to explain.

We often go to further and further lengths to try to represent what it is to be human. Life is lived in the present tense, in fragment sentences of symbols and verbs that don't coincide. In thoughtless thoughts while on the search for feelings. The ups and downs of relationships, depression, emotions. When I say anger you think

of the sounds; the inhales, the exhales, of base sounds of insults and syllables. Does that mean anything? We know what it's supposed to mean through other concepts learned, through the context of speaking and communicating throughout our lives. It's here that you glimpse what it truly is to be human. Feeling, experience, humanity, it's the thing you live but can't quite name.

It is something that struggles against containment, that can't be perfectly shared in a word, or measurement or a diagram. What makes us human? This thing, this complex ill-formed and ever-changing beast that can sometimes be glimpsed on fading screens or canvasses. I cannot name what it is to be human, but once or twice I think I almost had it pinned down somewhere on a page. But maybe I'm just too close to the subject.