Pandemics in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: Rethinking the (Post)Human

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Following the worldwide popularity of Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), dystopian narratives took the young adult publishing world by storm. The subsequent dystopian boom in young adult literature offered readers dreadful new worlds that emerged from the ashes of contemporary society after it was destroyed by violent wars, climate change, deadly contagious diseases, and the like.

As is widely understood (and some people still pretend to ignore), our society is currently facing an infectious disease that is straining the social order. Young adult dystopian literature has often represented the consequences of a pandemic – some of which consequences we are currently facing as a society today. From novels published at the beginning of this century, such as *The Way We Fall* by Megan Crewe (2002) and *The Last Dog on Earth* by Daniel Ehrenhaft (2003), to works like *The Eleventh Plague* by Jeff Hirsch (2011), *Masque of the Red Death* by Bethany Griffin (2012-2013), and *This Mortal Coil* by Emily Suvada (2017-2020), to highlight a few, this literature has explored the loss of human life, the paranoia caused by the fear of being infected, the struggle to find a cure, and how the infection (or the cure) can alter the human body – the body might evolve or retrogress, changing in ways such that it is no longer defined as human.

This essay discusses how pandemics and their effects on the human body are represented in recent young adult dystopian texts through the lens of posthuman studies. My analysis will focus on three young adult series: James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner* trilogy (2009-2011), Marissa Meyer’s *The Lunar Chronicles* (2012-2015), and Rory Power’s *Wilder Girls* (2019). In these works, the characters are confronted with the consequences of a viral outbreak, including zombie-like creatures and “unnatural” bodily changes. Due to these bodily changes, one can affirm that the infection provoked by the viral outbreak and/or cure creates posthuman bodies – bodies that threaten social norms by being different from the rule—forcing the reader to rethink what it actually means to be human and deconstructing the dominant idea implemented by the humanist worldview, where humanity is disconnected from the surrounding world.

A Definition of Posthumanism

During the Renaissance, a new vision about the human emerged, humanism. This new cosmovision “affirmed values of the individual and the right to self-determination” and “enshrined ‘Man’ as unique, the origin of all meaning, protagonist of History, the hegemonic measure of all things” (Knickerbocker 67). Thus, a new conception of the Human as an individual being with agency, responsible for his own destiny, reigned by reason, and as the centre of the universe emerged. Moreover, Man built himself in opposition to nature, the Other, and what was
considered to be monstrous. Then, humanism came to influence the construction of several binaries which are now, as the young adult dystopian novels under analysis will show, being questioned and challenged by posthuman studies.

In the last decades, there has been significant growth in the corpus of theoretical and critical posthuman studies. The following influential works on this philosophical perspective deserve our attention due to their own importance to this discussion. Firstly, N. Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), stresses a vision “of the human that embraces the possibilities of information, technologies […] and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival” (5). Secondly, in *What is Posthumanism?* (2010), Cary Wolfe argues that posthumanism “isn’t posthuman at all—in the sense of being ‘after’ our embodiment has been transcended – but is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself” (xv, author’s emphasis), accentuating how posthumanism defies humanist notions. Finally, Pramod K. Nayar’s *Posthumanism* (2013) distinguishes “transhumanism” from “critical posthumanism” as two different types of posthumanism. The latter of these “seeks to move beyond the traditional humanist ways of thinking about the autonomous, self-willed individual agent in order to treat the human itself as an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life, enmeshed with the environment and technology” (13).

Recent studies on posthumanism and children’s and young adult fiction use these critical works as a basis for further development, such as Victoria Flanagan’s *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: The Posthuman Subject* (2014), an exploration of the importance of posthumanism for adolescence identity formation, Zoe Jacque’s *Children’s Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (2015), in which she defines posthumanism as “a new ontology which goes beyond the borders of our kind” (2), and *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World* (2018), edited by Anita Tarr and Donna R. White, a volume that gathers several essays in which we can find a multiplicity of definitions regarding the concept of “posthumanism.” Some definitions of the term contradict themselves, and such happens, as Tarr and White state, because posthumanism is not “a monolithic concept” (22). In her essay collected in this volume, White claims that in the twenty-first century, to be posthuman signifies “to be more or less than human, but always means being different from human” (258). Although there is an assortment of definitions and ways to interpret this concept, the posthuman bodies under analysis are indeed more or less than human, but always different from what we tend to consider human.

Overall, this brief overview of posthumanist scholarship shows how this perspective decentres the human subject, thus exploring the close relationship of the human with both technology and nature. In other words, it explores how the human being interlinks with the surrounding world. By taking into consideration the corpus of theoretical and critical posthuman studies that has been briefly discussed, and since this essay will mainly look into the body, I shall then define posthumanism as a bodily difference that threatens social conventions and forces the reader to
rethink what it means to be human. This difference, which creates posthuman bodies, might be external, as in rotting flesh or gills, or internal, as two hearts or a mutated DNA structure. Since I will be discussing three different texts, which compromise several sequels, except for _Wilder Girls_, I will be giving a brief overview of each one of them, closely observing the viral outbreak and how the disease or the cure creates posthuman bodies.


After massive solar flares ravaged the Earth and permanently changed the Earth’s climate and environment in Dashner’s _The Maze Runner_ trilogy, human civilization was devastated. Realizing there would not be enough resources for all survivors, the Post-Flare Coalition began researching methods to control population growth; that is, scientists began researching procedures to painlessly exterminate a large number of people. During their research, the Coalition discovered the Flare. An airborne virus, the Flare “attacks the brain and shuts it down, painlessly. […] [It] was designed to slowly weaken in infection rate as it spreads from host to host” (Dashner, _The Kill Order_ 282). However, the virus did not work as expected. Instead, it slowly “ate” away the brain of those who were infected, turning them into bloodthirsty and irrational beings with no memory of their past, who killed, tortured, and ate human flesh. Those infected by the Flare came to be known as Cranks.

When Thomas, the protagonist of the trilogy, first faces a Crank, he is left with an uneasy feeling, describing the infected man as follows:

A man stood on the other side, gripping the bars with bloody hands. His eyes were wide and bloodshot, filled with madness. Sores and scars covered his thin, sun–burnt face. He had no hair, only diseased splotches of what looked like greenish moss. A vicious slit stretched across his right cheek; Thomas could see teeth through the raw, festering wound. Pink saliva dribbled in swaying lines from the man's chin (Dashner, _The Scorch Trials_ 15).

The Cranks evoke the figure of the zombie, a creature that is usually represented as a monster that leaks disgusting fluids, with parts of its body often missing, and which does not even seem to know what's going on beyond the fact that it is hungry, pissed off, or both (Greene and Mohammad 13). In recent years, zombie-like creatures have been depicted as the result of viral outbreaks, biological warfare, or even of a vaccine created to treat a pandemic outbreak that deeply changes human biology.

After being infected by the Flare, the humans in _The Maze Runner_ trilogy go through a decaying process. Just like the zombie, the Cranks rot and become walking bodies with no memories or cognitive capacity, ruled by their most primitive desires. By going through these bodily changes, the zombie-like Cranks deny humanism, revealing that the human being is not static and can retrogress into what is described as a primitive being—of course, this primeval transformation allows the Cranks to survive in a world that has become a wasteland, while humans find themselves close to extinction. Additionally, as Dale Knickerbocker claims, “In
opposition to the free will and individualism held so dear by humanists, the zombie lacks autonomy and individual identity, each action exactly as its peers and thus functioning—literally unwittingly—as a collective” (68). Thus, by losing their memories, the Cranks, as the zombie, also lose their personality, disputing once again the humanist worldview by shattering the notion of individualism.


In Marissa Meyer’s *The Lunar Chronicles*, a deadly pandemic, Letumosis, has killed millions of Earthens worldwide. This disease has four stages: the first stage is the incubation period in which nothing appears atypical; during the second stage, large boil-like patches in shades of blue appear on the skin; in the third stage, those who are infected become lethargic, unable to move or speak, and occasionally cough blood; in the final stage, the fingertips become tinged with blue due to lack of blood and oxygen. In New Beijing, the main setting of *Cinder* (2012), the ones infected are kept in a warehouse, taken care of by droids. When Cinder, the protagonist of the first novel, visits her step-sister, Peony, who was infected by Letumosis, she is faced with the dire conditions the sick live in: “the stench of excrement and rot reached out” and “flies had already caught on and filled the room with buzzing” (Meyer, *Cinder* 145-146). This pandemic was created in the laboratories of Luna, a country built on the moon’s surface. The virus was created due to Levana’s, the queen of Luna, wish to control the Earth and enslave its inhabitants.

As observed throughout *The Lunar Chronicles*, Earthens and Lunars, the latter of whom are considered the Other, do not see eye to eye. They share a strong distrust and hatred, even though Lunars are descendants of human colonizers that travelled to the moon to advance space exploration. As Cinder explains, “Lunars were a society that evolved from an Earthen moon colony centuries ago, but they weren’t human anymore. People said Lunars could alter a person’s brain – make you see things you shouldn’t see, feel things you shouldn’t feel, do things you didn’t want to do” (Meyer, *Cinder* 43). Due to their DNA being damaged from prolonged exposure to ionizing radiation from cosmic rays, Lunars were genetically mutated and can manipulate bioelectricity—they can control other people’s minds and bodies. It can be stated that Lunars inhabit posthuman bodies—posthuman bodies that reaffirm the idea that the human is not static. Moreover, here we can see the reinforcement of the notion that what we usually consider a human body is the norm, upon which one can either retrogress, as the Cranks, or evolve, as the Lunars. Due to these abilities, the relationship between Earth and Luna was strained.

Before infecting the Earthens, Lunars developed a cure to Letumosis—yet despite the existing animosity between Earth and Luna, Lunars did not intend to exterminate humanity. Nevertheless, this cure requires the blood of Lunar shells, that is, Lunars that do not have the ability to manipulate bioelectricity. More precisely, the cure requires the platelets that can be found in their blood. Platelets contain mitochondrial DNA, which is a:
form of DNA [that] consists of a tiny ring of hereditary material that actually lies outside the nucleus of the cell and is passed solely through the maternal line. It is not recombined between generations, as is nuclear DNA, and it seems to accumulate changes quite rapidly, which makes it ideal for analysis of recent evolutionary events (Tattersall, par. 7).

From the chimera-like monsters from ancient Greece to cinematic works such as *The Fly* (1986), one can perceive that there has always been an irrational fear about mixing the DNA of different species, a process seen as unnatural. This feeling of anxiety “may be mostly to do with how it destabilises our perceived human uniqueness and undermines our own moral superiority” (Bastian, “The Uneasy Truth about Human-Animal Hybrids” par. 29). Thus, to survive, Earthens must take a cure in which one of the main components is the blood of the Other—their DNAs must be mixed.

Those who are cured do not go through physical changes—not like the Cranks or the characters from *Wilder Girls*, as we will observe later. The only hint of every being infected is small scars left by the large boil-like patches. And even those can be insignificant since “The rash from the disease grew fainter every day. He doubted it would leave many scars” (Meyer, *Winter* 776). Nevertheless, can a body still be the same when there is what one might consider “alien” DNA running through their veins? Could not the cured Earthens acquire Lunars’ abilities, or perhaps develop their own, due to the mixing of DNA?

**Wilder Girls by Rory Power (2019)**

In Rory Power’s *Wilder Girls*, a highly contagious disease, referred to as Tox, has been contained in Raxter, an isolated island. Once a private school for girls, Raxter is now a quarantine area where the former students must deal with the effects and dangers of the Tox with little-to-no resources. The outbreak manifests in flare-ups, which leave the girls’ “bodies too wrecked to keep breathing, […] wounds that wouldn’t heal, or sometimes, [manifested in] a violence like a fever, turning girls against themselves” (Power 13). Most girls ended up dead from the wounds provoked by the Tox or by the deadly violence that has prompted them to kill each other. Those who survive the flare-ups develop bodily mutations, such as gills, two hearts, a taloned hand, a serrated ridge of bone down the back, or a second closed eyelid. After the first mutations took place, it is understood that the Tox models the girls after the natural environment (fauna and flora) that surrounds them. Not only do the girls go through these bodily mutations, but also the animals and the vegetation that populate the island. At the end of the novel, the origins of the mysterious Tox are revealed:

And there it is—the climate changing, the temperatures rising. I read once about creatures trapped in the arctic ice. Prehistoric, ancient things, coming awake as the ice melts. In Maine, on Raxter, a parasite slowly reaching into the weakest things—the irises, the crabs—until it was strong enough to reach the wilderness. Into us. (215)
A worm—a parasite—has taken hold of every living thing in Raxter. If one is to remove this dormant parasite from their body, they become empty shells—a body without speech, feelings, thoughts, or memories. The living beings of Raxter and the parasite have developed a symbiotic relationship; one cannot survive without the other.

The bodies of the girls are no longer similar to what one usually identifies as the body of a human. After surviving for so long, the girls, who are harshly treated by those who should be helping them, are left to die on the island. Due to the structures created by humanism, speciesism is strongly underlined by our society. As Wolfe points out in *Animal Rites* (2003),

as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of *whatever* species—or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference (8, author’s emphasis).

Thus, the girls’ mutations, a cross between human-animal-nature, deny them their human status. No longer seen as human, and once starved, probed, and tested, they have no more use to the CDC and are left to fend for themselves on a nightmarish island. Nonetheless, has not their journey on Raxter highlighted the girls’ humanity even though they inhabit a posthuman body? The presence of humanity in bodies that are no longer considered human (one might say, of a different species) undermines the humanist discourse of species since one must question the violence against these girls (or any other being) simply because of their bodily difference.

**Conclusion**

Humanism created a view of the human built in opposition to and wholly separated from the monster, the Other, and the animal. This worldview built boundaries that do not allow the human being to merge with all of the living beings that surround them. Additionally, this narrow vision built a concept of the human that stresses the idea that whatever those other beings are, the human cannot be: if the monster is vicious, the human is kind; if the Other is uncivilized, the human is civilized; if the animal is irrational, the human is rational.

As we can observe, the consequences of a pandemic viral infection in young adult dystopian fiction create posthuman bodies—the changes the human body goes through to become posthuman can be external or internal, as observed in *The Maze Runner* trilogy, *The Lunar Chronicles*, and *Wilder Girls*. These posthuman bodies force the reader to problematize the binary oppositions human/monster, human/Other, and human/animal established by humanism, as well as reconsider what one believes a human body to be. As the novels mentioned in this brief analysis reveal, the infection and/or cure resulted in posthuman bodies, that is, bodies that question and dismantle the aforementioned binaries. These bodies, which are strange and yet so alike, have the power to change perceptions, to open dialogue, and to unveil how powerful is the connection between human/monster, human/Other, and human/animal. Hence, in these novels, monstrosity,
otherness, and animality are depicted as a part of human ontology, just waiting to be awakened by a pandemic. Therefore, the human being has always been (and will always be) interconnected to the world that surrounds them, and is part of a network of relationships that cannot be detached. Contrary to what humanism presumes, there are no boundaries, no hierarchies, no categorizations. Then, as Michel Foucault ominously declared, “as the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end” (422).

Notes
1. Needless to say, when this new view about the human was formulated, “human” actually meant white cis straight male. For that reason, I used the pronouns “his,” “himself,” and “he”.
2. Another important study on this field is Rosi Braidotti’s The Posthuman (2013).
3. More recently, in the field of young adult fiction, Jennifer Harrison’s Posthumanist Reading in Dystopian Young Adult Fiction: Negotiating the Nature/Culture Divide (2019) was published.
4. Later, the plague mutates, and not only does it affect the Earthen, but also the Lunars.
5. When Hetty, the protagonist, faces the grizzly bear that inhabited the woods, she is confronted with the deep changes the wildlife in Raxter has gone through: “The bear’s head swings up and around to look right at me. I let out a muffled scream. One half of its face is bare to the bone” (177).

Works Cited


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