More than Human Short Guide

More than Human by Theodore Sturgeon

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Characters

More Than Human includes both fully developed and psychologically complex characters and caricatures or stereotypes.

The novel's three-part structure prevents any one character—except Homo Gestalt itself—from being central to the whole work, but one character tends to dominate each section. Lone, although an idiot, is the telepath and brain around which the immature Homo Gestalt begins to form in the first section, "The Fabulous Idiot." Lone is indeed idiotic, stupid, inarticulate, and crude, but he represents, perhaps, the childlike state of Homo Gestalt, intellectually and spiritually limited, but innocent and capable of the first halting steps toward self-knowledge and moral awareness. It is Lone who, in his very inarticulateness, best articulates the novel's theme of loneliness and the need for community. Gerry is the narrator and protagonist of the second part, "Baby is Three," and he is closely paralleled by Hip, protagonist of the final section, "Morality." While Gerry and Hip are the main actors in the novel's dialectic of power and moral responsibility, and while they symbolize different stages of Homo Gestalt's growth—Gerry, its vengeful, amoral adolescence; Hip, the dawning of moral maturity—they are at the same time the most fully developed characters. Each, in quite a different way, is an abused child and an adult outcast, and each responds to his early experiences in a psychologically convincing way. Each journeys towards self-knowledge, and each is finally able to transcend the crippling limitations of his earlier life and achieve a sense of shared humanity, a near religious sense of his oneness with his fellows.

Most of the other characters are either deliberately cast as types or caricatures or are inadequately developed. Although Janie, for example, starts as an interesting and individualized child, she fades, as an adult, into a pallid stereotype of supportive femininity. Beanie and Bonnie are notable for little other than blackness, unusual in science fiction of the time. Mr. Kew, on the other hand, is a caricature and a frighteningly effective one. He is an insanely repressive father, determined to break the will of his children—to control or destroy their innate depravity. And although he is dead by page 14, the effects of his cruelty resonate throughout the novel and in an ironic way ultimately result in much good.

Social Concerns

Theodore Sturgeon's masterpiece is a novel about children and childhood.

On one level it can be read as a story of child abuse. Nearly all the significant characters—Lone, Gerry Thompson, Hip Barrows, the twins, Janie, and the Kew sisters—are victims of parental abuse or neglect and of societal indifference. And there is considerable psychological insight in Sturgeon's portrayal of a character like Gerry, who grows to become a cruel and vengeful man, wanting to hurt others as he himself was hurt.

But on a deeper level, the novel participates in an age-old debate about human nature: Are people innately good or innately evil? Is the human being, as Rousseau and the Romantics claimed, originally innocent, a pure soul corrupted by the blight of society; or is the human soul itself, as Augustine and the Puritans argued, the source of a corruption against which society must defend itself by laws and customs that restrain the individual will? Sturgeon in essence supports the Rousseauian view, although not without ambiguity and modification.

The children of the novel are innocents. And these children, outcasts like many of Sturgeon's protagonists, retain an astonishing power, manifested in the psychic powers of telepathy, telekinesis, and teleportation, powers that Sturgeon seems to imply are innate in all children.

Paradoxically, Sturgeon suggests, it is their very status as outcasts, cruelly neglected by society, that enables them to preserve the powers that normally wither away in the face of social norms and customs. Yet the novel does not celebrate the children's innocence or power or freedom from society; instead it argues the need for them to develop a sense of moral responsibility and to enter society once again—to renew and reshape it. In a sense, then, the novel articulates a dialectic of innocence and experience, of freedom and responsibility.

Techniques

More Than Human began as a long story, "Baby Is Three" (1952), which Sturgeon later expanded to novel length by including two additional sections detailing the earlier and later life of Homo Gestalt (and by radically changing the original ending). While the seams show to some extent (there are chronological problems and other difficulties which are evident on re-reading), the novel does enjoy a satisfying thematic unity in the gradual physical, intellectual, and moral maturation of Homo Gestalt. A sense of unity is also provided by the parallel movement of all three parts from fragmentation and isolation to unity and wholeness.

Stylistically, More Than Human is an impressive achievement. Each section has its own style and narrative voice. "The Fabulous Idiot" features some of Sturgeon's most imaginative and poetic prose —especially in the opening description of Lone—and a disjointed, fragmented narrative that effectively mirrors the alienated lives of the individuals who have not yet come together to form Homo Gestalt. "Baby is Three" is narrated by Gerry in a voice that is just right, bitter, sarcastic, and yet deeply affecting. The voice and style of "Morality" are perhaps less distinctive, but still appropriate, a calm almost dispassionate omniscient narrator who can express the novel's final vision.

And both the second and third parts are structured as psychiatric detective stories, as the protagonists strive to overcome occlusions, barriers to self-knowledge.

Themes

On the surface at least, More Than Human embodies some common themes of science fiction: the misfit mutants, superior to and alienated from normal human society; the next stage of human evolution viewed as the development of a higher consciousness linking all humanity; the impact on society of psychic powers. Yet, while Sturgeon's speculations on all these matters are in themselves quite interesting and entertaining, the heart of the novel lies elsewhere; all the science fictional apparatus merely provides him with a set of metaphors that express his abiding concern with the themes of alienation and love.

As several critics have pointed out, More Than Human, like many other science fiction stories, is at a deep level a wishfulfillment fantasy of power. The scorned and neglected children possess remarkable powers. Lone, the hapless idiot, can look into a man's eyes and wordlessly order him to commit suicide; Janie, the hated daughter of an unfaithful wife, is a telekineticist; Beanie and Bonnie, black twins with speech impediments, are teleports; Baby, a Mongoloid child, is a computer of limitless power; and Gerry, the bitter runaway from a Dickensian orphanage, combines Lone's powers with a keen and angry intelligence. And their individual powers are only the beginning, for together they comprise a single entity, "Homo Gestalt," the apparent beginning of a new species. Perhaps the most frightening moment of the novel occurs when Gerry finally recognizes the nature of Homo Gestalt and his own function as its controlling will and intelligence. Asked by the psychiatrist who has helped him what he plans to do next, Gerry responds that he wants to have fun, "the kind of fun everybody has . . . kicking someone around, someone small who can't fight back . . . What the hell is morality, anyway?" The stage seems set for a power fantasy of revenge, like Stephen King's Carrie (1974).

The quality of the novel, however, lies in its controlling ethical vision. Gerry— and Homo Gestalt—in fact learn what morality is. The novel's climax is not Gerry's recognition of his powers, nor the acts of cruelty he subsequently commits. Homo Gestalt is not complete with his intellectual maturation; it remains fragmented and alienated against itself, normal human society, and a society of its fellow Gestalt creatures until the incorporation of one final member, Hip Barrows. Hip is another neglected child, but he has no special powers; he is merely the conscience of Homo Gestalt, "the one with the insight called ethics who can change it to the habit called morals." Hip triumphs over Gerry by forcing him to confront the evil he has done and recognize it as evil. And Gerry's shame and renunciation of his past behavior set the stage for the novel's final vision of a transcendent, godlike humanity. But it is essential to realize that this transcendence, for Sturgeon, comes only after individual humans become morally aware and responsible. People cannot become more than human without first becoming fully human.

Key Questions

More Than Human is a novel of ideas, emphasizing ethical matters that are common to the human condition. Even so, the characterizations of some of its figures are memorable. A good discussion might begin with the characters themselves, looking at how well developed they are, and move into the ethical matters the characterizations raise. Can Gerry's evil be justified by the abuse he has endured? Is a moral conscience essential to being fully human? Is humanity continuing to evolve? If so, will it evolve into a better species or a worse one? The novel's themes and characterizations cry out for speculation, thought, and discussion.

1. How well motivated are Gerry's misdeeds? Does his hurtful background make him at all sympathetic?

2. Does More Than Human make a good argument for the necessity of morality to direct and limit one's actions?

3. What are the ethics More Than Human implies should govern human behavior?

4. Do the children succeed in becoming more than human? What does being more than human consist of? Is it better or worse than being merely human?

5. How are Gerry and Hip contrasted with each other?

6. How does Hip affect Gerry's views of himself and of others? Are the changes in Gerry credible?

7. How well-developed is the characterization of Mr. Kew? What are the effects of his actions on the narrative?

8. Does the structure of More Than Human reflect the nature of Homo Gestalt?

9. What barriers to self-knowledge do the children overcome? How do they overcome them? Do the barriers and the ways they are overcome reflect aspects of the human condition?

10. Is Homo Gestalt superior to homo sapiens? In what ways? Is it inferior? In what ways?

11. Is the ending of the novel too optimistic? Is it consistent with the characterizations of the children?

12. Who is the true villain, the ultimate antagonist, in the novel?

Literary Precedents

One can look in several directions for precedents or possible sources for More Than Human. A number of science fiction novels, most notably Olaf Stapledon's Odd John (1936), deal with mutants outcast because of their very superiority to the rest of humanity. Odd John, however, lacks the humanistic optimism that characterizes Sturgeon's novel. Sturgeon's ultimate vision of a godlike humanity may also owe some debt to Stapledon, especially in Last and First Men (1930) and Star Maker (1937). Another parallel appeared the same year as More Than Human, Arthur C. Clarke's Childhood End's (1953), similar in its vision of humanity evolving to a godlike state but lacking Sturgeon's emphasis on ethical maturity as a necessary condition and the powerful emotional impact of his characterizations.

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