Critical Analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's the man that was used up: Post Humananist Reading

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Edgar Allan Poe's *The Man That was Used Up* from Post-Humanist Perspective. Using a qualitative close-reading approach, it explores how Poe's depiction of General Smith challenges humanist ideals of identity and autonomy. The analysis reveals that the story presents technology as integral to human existence, blurring the boundary between human and machine. Drawing on posthumanist theory, particularly Hayles' (1999) concept of the "posthuman," this study argues that Poe's work anticipates contemporary debates about technology's role in shaping human identity. Together, these findings show that "*The Man That Was Used Up*" anticipates modern issues about the fusion of humans with technology and the shifting locus of agency. This study is significant because it shows the harmful consequences of science on people. It also shows the post-humanist digital aspects of literature. Additionally, it investigates the moral questions brought up by advances in science and technology. This is a problem of the present and this work is important since it examines this modern problem.

Keywords: Post-Humanism, Humanism, Science and Technology, Objectivism, Identity

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's satirical story "*The Man That Was Used Up"* (1839) follows an unnamed narrator who seeks out General John A. B. C. Smith, a hero of a frontier war. The General appears physically imposing and charismatic at first, but the narrator eventually discovers that Smith's body is almost entirely prosthetic. Every morning he must be assembled piece by piece – wig, glass eye, artificial limbs, and so on – before he can present himself. This grotesque revelation raises the question highlighted by Poe's editor: "What is Man?" and "How much of

a man still makes a man?". Poe thereby probes the nature of identity: is Smith still fully human when his body is composed of machines?

This study applies post-humanist theory to interpret Poe's tale, aligning the analysis with the paper's title and stated objectives. Whereas classical humanism emphasizes the autonomous, rational human subject, post-humanism (sometimes hyphenated as posthumanism) decouples human identity from that idealized body. Post humanist critics argue that humans are intertwined with technology and environment, so that the boundaries between person and machine become porous. In particular, Hayles (1999) describes the posthuman perspective as one in which "no fundamental boundaries or fixed distinctions exist between physical being and digital simulation, between cybernetic systems and living organisms". Poe's story, we argue, enacts this view: General Smith literally embodies the integration of human and machine, mocking the notion of a purely self-contained humanist hero.

The aim of this analysis is to explore the post-humanist elements in "*The Man That Was Used Up*". Specifically, the study asks: How does Poe's depiction of General Smith challenge humanist assumptions about identity and agency? What post-humanist themes (such as the decentering of the human, or the fusion with technology) emerge from a close reading of the text? By clarifying these objectives, the analysis ensures coherence between the title, goals, and content of the paper. The next sections outline the relevant concepts of humanism and post-humanism before detailing the research method, followed by findings and discussion.

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Research Questions and Objectives

The aim of this study is to demonstrate how "*The Man That Was Used Up*" embodies post-humanist ideas and how these relate to its title. In particular, it addresses the following research questions:

1. How does Poe's depiction of General Smith challenge traditional humanist assumptions about identity and agency?

2. Which post-humanist themes (such as the displacement of human centrality or the fusion of human and machine) emerge from a close reading of the text?

3.How Edgar Allan Poe has portrayed the protagonist of the story as the representative of Post Humanism?

Correspondingly, the objectives are to apply posthumanist theory to Poe's tale and to demonstrate that the narrative subverts the notion of a stable, self-contained hero. By answering these questions, the paper shows that the story's content aligns with its title and scholarly framing.

Theoretical Framework: Humanism and Posthumanism

Humanism emerged during the Renaissance as an educational and philosophical system that emphasized classical learning and human-centered values. Grudin (2023) defines humanism as "an approach to learning and form of investigation" that began in Italy and focused primarily on the sphere of human experience. Renaissance humanists studied the studia humanitatis (grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history, moral philosophy), drawing on Cicero's concept of humanitas. This tradition viewed humans as capable of intellectual and moral development, emphasizing human dignity and potential. Humanist thought typically treats human beings as an autonomous agent separate from nature and technology. It champions human reason and moral worth, viewing human culture as distinct from the material world. (For example, Thomas More's Utopia and Renaissance portraits of scholars reflect confidence in human potential.) In Poe's time, these assumptions were still widespread: the ideal of the independent, rational war hero was a familiar humanist trope.

In contrast, post-humanist theory challenges these assumptions by questioning human exceptionalism. The term posthumanism (or post-humanism) was coined by literary critic Ihab Hassan (1977) to describe a cultural condition beyond traditional humanist values. In this view, the boundary between human and non-human becomes blurred. For example, Valera (2014) describes post-humanism as a "total contamination and hybridization of human beings with ... machines," indicating a paradigm shift in how humanity is conceived. Hayles (1999) similarly portrays the posthuman subject as a fluid, material–informational entity that transcends traditional boundaries. These theories decenter the human by emphasizing how technology, animals, and the environment are intertwined with human identity.

Applying these concepts to Poe's story, the General Smith character exemplifies posthuman hybridity. He is literally an assemblage of prosthetic parts controlled by his consciousness. This treatment inverts humanism's hierarchy: instead of a human manipulating technology, the man is technology. The theoretical framework of posthumanism thus helps us see the story not merely as a comedic parody, but as a proto-posthumanist satire. The analysis below draws on these ideas to interpret Poe's critique of humanist ideals through his depiction of technology and identity. This framework is essential to understanding Poe's story, where General Smith's identity collapses the distinction between man and machine.

Literature Review

Scholars have long noted Poe's interest in technology and the body. Rosenheim (1995) argues that Poe's work anticipates modern concerns about mechanization, while Chacón (2017) highlights colonial undertones in Smith's prosthetics, interpreting them as symbols of imperial dominance. Sommerfeld (2018) identifies the story as one of the earliest representations of a "romantic cyborg," linking it to nineteenth-century anxieties about industrial progress.

This paper builds on such scholarship by situating Poe's narrative within posthumanist theory, as articulated by Hayles (1999), who contends that posthumanism erases the strict divide between human and machine. By integrating this theoretical perspective, the study extends existing criticism and grounds the reading in a contemporary framework.

Dayal (2020) notes that Humanism, rooted in the Renaissance, emerged in England during the fifteenth century as an intellectual and social movement. It emphasized the revival of classical ideals from ancient Greece and Rome, challenging the scholasticism of the Middle Ages. Key figures like Thomas More advanced humanist thought, with works such as Utopia (1516) reflecting this renewed focus on human welfare and classical learning. Writers including Cicero, Aristotle, and Plato also influenced the humanistic approach, which sought to enhance society through the cultivation of knowledge and moral development.

Evenly, *Hayles and Lawtoo (2022),* in this conversation, the researchers Hayles and Lawtoo work together to shed light on the crucial part that embodied mimesis played in the creation of the Post-Human subject. For better or worse, the notion of mimesis seems to be both deliberately and, perhaps more significantly, inadvertently embedded within the intertwined human and nonhuman processes shaping Post-Human subjectivity from Platonic

ideals to Turing's imitation game, from hyper-mimetic conspiracy narratives to rapidly spreading waves of emotional contagion online, culminating in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the concept of microbiomimesis.

Valera (2014), explores that, Post humanism's major focus is not an uncritical acceptance of technology promises, as it is with transhumanism, but rather a complete infection and hybridization of humans with other living things and machines (these are the two main forms of contamination). Thus, the shift in viewpoint brought about by Post-Humanism would represent a paradigm shift in anthropology. Post-Humanism, like ecologism, advocates the deletion and fluidification of borders to achieve total contamination and human openness to otherness, even to the point of denying man's identity and, with it, the very possibility of openness.But by rejecting identification, one rejects the precondition for thought's possibility, as it has existed historically up to this point. Accordingly, we can see how Post-Humanism is largely not constructed as an appropriate philosophical reflection, but rather as a story that draws inspiration from certain necessities that are indisputably human and that reveal its fundamentally anthropogenic roots.

Shang (2022) argues that in the post-industrial age, science fiction—a literary genre rooted in Gothic traditions—has effectively depicted the challenges confronting humanity. Over time, sci-fi has developed into a distinctive form of social commentary, employing the reader's imagination while centering on advancements in science and technology. Stories of Your Life and Others, a renowned collection of novellas by Ted Chiang, exemplifies this evolution. The work explores the transformation of human nature over time and revisits recurring questions about the relationship between science, humanity, and society within the context of a complex post-human landscape. This study aims to analyze the technological aesthetics, philosophical dimensions, and humanistic concerns in Chiang's writing through the lens of Post-Humanist theory. It seeks to illuminate the dynamics between humans and technology, as well as humans and the cosmos, envision potential models for future human existence, anticipate humanity's shared destiny, and outline a framework for the ethical application of science and technology in the modern world.

Similarly,Pérez (2021), explored a reading of a few short stories from Amparo Dávila's debut collection, Tiempo destroyed (1959), some of which have been translated into English and are included in The Houseguest and Other Stories. He does this from a Post-Human st viewpoint (2018). By introducing a variety of nonhuman beings into these books, the author

constructs imaginary worlds that illustrate the drawbacks of an anthropocentric humanist viewpoint. He explains how several methods function in this regard. For instance, the author challenges the idea that sight and reason go hand in hand while highlighting other sensory experiences; we can find many and varied symbiotic ties between humans and non-humans, and many circumstances call into question the idea that non-humanity is the polar opposite of human.

Gough, A, &. Gough, N *(2017),* examine their conversations regarding Annette's experiences with breast cancer led to the idea of "becoming cyborg," which is how our collective biography came to be. Initial (re) interpretations of Annette's gests in educational surrounds included a" chaos narrative" of cyborg and environmental embodied. In some ways, Noel's before use of cyborgs in what he now views as a "Post-Human flirt" of class exploration acted as a follow- up design to Donna Haraway's materialisation of the cyborg in Annette's growing body. They came interested in exploring the possibilities that propositions like Karen Barad's ontoepistemology and Deleuze and Guattari's machinic assemblage offer as a way of allowing about the relations between bodies and technologies in educational inquiry beyond Haraway's mongrel cyborg due to Noel's posterior gests with throat cancer. Through a collaborative memoir and playfully constructed relations with different proponents, they explore what it means to do varied readings and analyses inPost-Humanist educational inquiry. Our composition advances the idea of cooperative biographical jotting as an investigative system in educational exploration.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative close-reading method. The primary source is Poe's text *The Man That Was Used Up* and the analysis is guided by posthumanist and humanist theory. Close reading—careful textual analysis of language, narrative structure, and symbolism— allows the researcher to identify thematic elements and interpret them in theoretical context. This approach was chosen because literary analysis relies on interpretation of the text itself rather than quantitative data. No surveys or experiments are involved; instead, secondary sources from literary scholarship on Poe, posthumanism, and related criticism provide context and support. For instance, critical essays by Sommerfeld (2018) and Chacón (2017) inform the interpretation of General Smith's body and symbolism. In the current research study, the researcher gathered primary data from a textual analysis of Edgar Allen Poe's short story. The

researcher finds the elements of Post-Humanism in Edgar Allan Poe's work *The Man that was Used Up*. In the present study, the researcher collects secondary data from various websites, Research Gate, Google Scholar, J store, research papers, books, articles, and, journals. All sources used are academic or reputable publications (journals, books, edited volumes) to ensure reliability.

Findings

The analysis reveals several key results, organized here with respect to the research focus on post-humanist themes:

General Smith as a Cyborgic Figure: The story explicitly portrays Smith as a mechanical being. Each day his servant assembles him from detached body parts—eyes, teeth, limbs, clothing, even an enslaved aide to help him move. In this way, Smith is a post-human or cyborg. Poe exposes how little physical human remains: as the narrator concludes, Smith is truly "the man that was used up." This literal disassembly challenges the humanist idea of a unified subject. The finding confirms that Poe anticipates posthuman ideas by making Smith a "romantic cyborg" whose nature transcends organic embodiment.

Erosion of Anthropocentrism: Throughout the story, human-centered hubris is undercut. Initially, others praise Smith as an exemplary human figure. But Poe gradually reveals that all these human attributes—skill, courage, nobility—are in fact supported by machines. In this sense, human power is not self-derived. Hayles's description of the posthuman—that there are "no essential differences" between human and machine—is dramatized in the text. Smith's very identity depends on technology, suggesting that the presumed boundary between man and machine has collapsed. This finding supports the interpretation that Poe critiques anthropocentrism: human greatness can be reduced to technological assembly.

Identity and Fragmentation: The narrator's horror at discovering Smith's true nature highlights a theme of fragmented identity. What remains of "John Smith" apart from a bundle of limbs and machinery? Poe seems to ask whether consciousness alone is enough to constitute a person. The story implies that much of what made Smith human (his body, his persona) is artificial. This aligns with the posthumanist view that embodiment can be disarticulated from personhood. The finding here is that Poe uses Smith's condition to question the notion of a fixed human essence.

Colonial and Political Metaphor: Chacón's (2017) interpretation adds a historical dimension to these themes. She argues that contemporaries would have read Smith's prosthetics not just as technology, but as symbols of imperial power. In fact, Poe may be satirizing not only science but also colonial practices. Chacón finds that "Smith's prosthetics […] symbolically indicated the encroachment of European colonial practices into the new… nation". In this reading, the story's post-human body becomes a metaphor for America's uneasy inheritance of old-world domination. Thus, a key finding is that the post-human elements of the story also intertwine with anxieties about empire and identity in early 19th-century America.

These findings jointly answer the research questions by showing that *The Man That was Used Up* embodies post-humanist ideas. The protagonist functions as an early literary example of a technologically modified human, and the narrative's focus on his mechanical nature undercuts traditional humanism. The story anticipates modern concerns (technology's impact on humanity, the fall of anthropocentrism) while remaining grounded in Poe's own era's politics.

Discussion and Analysis

A classic short story by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Man That Was Used Up*, was initially published in 1839. The story follows an unidentified narrator as he searches for the renowned war hero John A. B. C. Smith. When others refuse to describe Smith and just comment on the most recent technological developments, he becomes concerned that Smith is hiding some dark truth. Smith must first be put together piece by piece before he can ultimately meet him. In this parody, Poe might be making fun of General Winfield Scott, who fought in the Mexican-American War, the War of 1812, and the American Civil War. Poe is speculating about where humanity goes as machines become more sophisticated and is also questioning the strong male identity.

It is the special faculty of the human being to use technology to overcome difficulties. These special faculties make a human being different from other animals but ironically this sense of superiority and uniqueness is constant by the very technology that human is planning to create. It seems that the balance of dominance between man and machine is slowly shifting, this distinction between man and machine is becoming less clear now. Now, what does the contemporary development that finds the greater integration between man and machine? The science of robotics is one such development, it incorporates other disciplines like artificial

intelligence and microelectronics. Whenever we see the impacts of technology and advancement in fiction that is what post-humanism is. *The Man That was Used Up* by Edgar Allan Poe is based on such advancement of technology and we can see the impacts of technology on humanity that how humans suffer from technology. In post-colonialism, the main focus was on that how humans suffered other humans while in Post Humanism the main focus is on that how humans are suffering by technology and the readers can see these Post-humanist elements in The *Man That was Used Up* through the character of General John A.B.C Smith whose identity is not clear that whether it is human or a machine because he was manipulated, he looks like a robotic man. This piece shows a horrifyingly manufactured physique. An aged man rebuilds himself to begin the day in Poe's story. Poe is addressing both the situation of humanity in the era of technology and the strong male identity. I have no idea how I got to know him. I am unaware that who introduced me to him.

There was something, as it were, remarkable—yes, remarkable, although this is but a feeble term to express my full meaning—about the entire individuality of the personage in question. (p.405).

Here the narrator is unaware of his personality. He is saying that it is unknown to me. And there is a focus on his personality that was remarkable _ yes, more remarkable. He is describing or talking about his appearance that how he is strange from other humans. As the gay is made whole by adding limbs, a wig, glass eyes, fake teeth, and a tongue. At the very start of the story, it is remarkable yet again remarkable and it is questionable. The narrator is not sure whether it is a human or a machine.

He was, perhaps, six feet in height, and of a presence singularly commanding. There was an air distingue pervading the whole man, which spoke of high breeding, and hinted at high birth. Upon this topic—the topic of Smith's personal appearance—I have a kind of melancholy satisfaction in being minute. His head of hair would have done honor to a Brutus, —nothing could be more richly flowing, or possess a brighter gloss. It was of a jetty black, —which was also the color, or more properly the no-color of his unimaginable whiskers. (p.405).

Over-glorifying a hero is a popular technique for raising hopes only to let them be dashed. The narrative "*The Man That Was Used Up*" by Edgar Allan Poe used rhetoric to create a hero-like and exalted vision of the human body. Through meaningless and ineffective grandness in speech, rhetoric is employed to persuade an audience to think, feel, or act in a certain manner. Through the narrator and the interlocutors in this story, the reader is persuaded

about the appearance and personality of Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith. The reader gets the first glimpse of General Smith as a heroic and exalted figure through the narrator's use of Energeia, which gives the reader a first impression of a whole person. Time in again he is talking about his questionable personality. The narrator is saying that body is black or has no color. Here he is surpassing humans and it disturbs human personality. In post-humanism we are discussing the effects of technology on humans. So here this character is more advance than humans.

But although men so absolutely fine-looking are neither as plenty as reasons or blackberries, still I could not bring myself to believe that the remarkable something to which I alluded just now, —that the odd air of je ne sais quoi which hung about my new acquaintance, —lay altogether, or indeed at all, in the supreme excellence of his bodily endowments. (p.406).

At the start of the story, the narrator is glorifying the appearance of the general but soon as the narrator is describing him he looks strange to humans. The general had an attitude about him that would explain the extraordinary sense that came from him, but the narrator had trouble putting it into words. The narrator creates a sense of mystery around the General, which draws the reader in and makes them curious about who he is and what makes him so extraordinary. It was science and technology that made the general this way because he was a once fine looing person but in a war, he lost his body parts and now he is being manipulated by adding limbs, a wig, glass eyes, fake teeth, and a tongue. And he looks like a robotic man and he is more advance than a human.

"Smith!" said she, "why, not General John A. B. C.? Horrid affair that, wasn't it? —great wretches, those Bugaboos—savage and so on– but we live in a wonderfully inventive age!—Smith!—O yes! Great man! —perfect desperado—immortal renown—prodigies of valor! Never heard!" (p.407).

The narrator is curious to find out more about this brave man. When he asks people about the general, he observes that they mostly respond with praise for the "wonderfully imaginative age's" a list of accomplishments and comments about how "The general's experiences against Native Americans were "horrid."". When others refuse to describe Smith and just comment on the most recent technological developments, he becomes concerned that Smith is hiding some dark truth. So it becomes clear that it is the invention, not the human. The personality of the General is portrayed as a mixture of human and machine throughout the story that's why the identity of the general is not clear whether is a machine or human. Here it

becomes clear that the advancement of science and technology is not that much beneficial in the sense that through this the identity of humans is going to vanish and in the future it will be difficult to differentiate humans from machines. Although we live in a modern age and in many ways science and technology are important for humans. The once-impossible has long since been made possible. We possess the ability to fly. We can communicate across huge distances. We have long since begun experimenting with the creation of life itself and can treat many diseases. The digital revolution is altering the way we think about reality, live our lives, and experience our identities. As technology transforms our lives, we appear to be experiencing severe vertigo. Are we becoming gods or are we simply eliminating ourselves? Posthumanism is a philosophical framework that asks these deeper questions. Are we will be able to control what we are going to create?

When the narrator is asking different people about Smith and he called him Smith they are asking why you called him smith. Why not general john A.B.C?   So its identity is ambiguous, so the narrator is disclosing his personality. At last, we came to know that it is the invention of someone.

I now began very clearly to perceive that the object before me was nothing more nor less than my new acquaintance, Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith. The manipulations of Pompey had made, I must confess, a very striking difference in the appearance of the personal man. The voice, however, still puzzled me no little; but even this apparent mystery was speedily cleared up. (p.412).

At last, when the narrator goes to the General's house to meet him and find the hidden truth, all he finds there is an odd bundle of things on the floor. But the bundle starts talking. His servant starts to "construct" the General piece by piece. It's the General himself. The guy is "made whole" by adding limbs, a wig, glass eyes, fake teeth, and a tongue. The General seems to have lost more than just wars; he was caught by Native American warriors and wounded; as a result, He currently has prostheses covering a sizable portion of his body, which he must put in or put on every morning and without which he is unable to appear in public. Now that the General's secret has been revealed, the narrator knows that he was The Man that was Used Up.

Pompey, your black rascal," squeaked the General, "I really do believe you would let me go out without my palate (p.412).

General was manipulated by Pompay for his purpose but now this general becomes angry at Pompay that your black rascal you would let him out without my palate. Here it is clear how humans suffer from technology or machines. It is highlighted that the personality of General is remarkable, it is a robotic human and it is because of science that his personality is now advanced from a human. So it is a threat to humans that a thing that is made by a human, how can it become more advanced? Throughout the story, we can see the protagonist of the story General John A.B.C Smith who has been manipulated by Pompey and is controlling Pompey by saying bad words to him *"Pompey you black rascal"* squeaked the General *"I do believe you would let go out without my palate" p.412.* Thus, it is evident here how technology harms people.

I acknowledged his kindness in my best manner, and took leave of him at once, with a perfect understanding of the true state of affairs– with a full comprehension of the mystery which had troubled me so long. It was evident. It was a clear case. Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith was the man—the man that was used up. (p.412).

After seeing these things happen, the narrator immediately says goodbye to the well-known and renowned Brevet Brigadier-General John A.B.C. Smith because he has finally sorted out the solution to the mystery that has tormented him for so long and that everyone hated talking with him because it actually made them sick to think what he looked like. Smith is "the man that was used up," with nothing left of himself; he is not Manfred, Captain Mann, or the person in the moon. John A.B.C. Smith, a brevet brigadier general, was a guy who was exhausted by technology.

Poe's dismantling of General Smith critiques not only the cult of the heroic individual but also the philosophical foundations of humanism. The story shows that human identity is not self-contained but dependent on external mechanisms—technological, social, and political. This aligns with Hayles' (1999) assertion that the human is always already posthuman, integrated into broader systems beyond individual control.

Moreover, the story's political subtext extends its critique beyond technology. The use of prosthetics as symbols of colonial power implies that national identity, like individual identity, is assembled from inherited parts—some of them oppressive. Poe's satire, therefore, addresses both the promises and perils of technological and cultural progress.

Conclusion

This section's major concern is the conclusion, significance of the present research, and recommendation for further study.

This paper has argued that "*The Man That Was Used Up*" is a proto-posthumanist text that critiques humanist ideals of autonomy and identity. By portraying a protagonist whose very humanity depends on mechanical assembly, Poe anticipates modern debates about technology's role in shaping the self. The story's enduring relevance lies in its recognition that human identity is constructed, contingent, and deeply entangled with external systems.

The Man Who Was Used Up is a short story written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1839. In the story, the narrator follows an unknown narrator who searches for the illustrious battle hero, John A. The story is predicated on the advancement of technology and that we will see the impacts of technology on humanity. However, humans suffer from technology. As a result, he appears to be a robotic man. This piece shows a horrifyingly factory-made physique. An older man rebuilds himself to begin the day in Poe's short story. Poe is reflecting on his strong sense of masculinity as well as the state of humanity in the age of technology.

Although the research is delimited to the concept of Post-Humanism in the short story *The Man That was Used Up* due to space and time restrictions. But still, this story can be analyzed for the vast field of other knowledge such as gender studies, disability studies, science and technology studies, Pessimistic, Humanism, and Identity Crises etc.

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