

Reconfiguring the Human: Crisis, Subjectivity and the Persistence of Literary Humanism

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Abstract: Humanism has long been treated as a coherent intellectual inheritance from the Renaissance, grounded in human dignity, rationality, and moral autonomy. Yet modern theory has repeatedly announced its demise. This article challenges both continuity and obsolescence narratives by arguing that literary humanism is best understood as a recurring crisis-formation rather than a stable doctrine. Across historical ruptures—the collapse of scholastic theology, Enlightenment universalism, Romantic interiority, existential disillusionment, postcolonial critique, and postmodern anti-humanism—literature repeatedly reconstructs the human subject under conditions of epistemic instability. Through sustained analysis of Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Voltaire, Goethe, Dostoevsky, Sartre, Camus, Achebe, and Atwood, and in dialogue with theorists such as Paul Oskar Kristeller, Charles Taylor, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Edward Said, and Martha Nussbaum, this study argues that humanism persists precisely because it is unstable. Literature does not preserve a fixed model of the human; it continually renegotiates agency, dignity, and ethical responsibility in response to historical crisis. Literary humanism survives not as ideology but as structural necessity: narrative cannot relinquish the problem of subjectivity without forfeiting its ethical function.

Keywords: Literary humanism; Renaissance subjectivity; anti-humanism; existential freedom; Enlightenment rationality; postcolonial critique; narrative agency; ethical criticism; subject formation; modern literary theory.

Introduction: Humanism After Its Alleged Death: Few concepts have undergone as many declarations of death as humanism. Twentieth-century theory repeatedly positioned “the human” as a construct produced by discourse, ideology, or institutional power. Michel Foucault famously suggested that “man” is a recent invention destined to disappear (Foucault). Louis Althusser denounced humanism as ideological mystification (Althusser). Martin Heidegger critiqued Western humanism as metaphysical self-deception (Heidegger). Yet despite these critiques, literary studies continue to revolve around questions of agency, responsibility, voice, and dignity. The human subject may be theoretically destabilized, but it remains narratively indispensable.

This paradox forms the central problem of this article: why does literature persistently return to the human even when philosophy attempts to dismantle it?

Traditional accounts trace literary humanism to the Renaissance revival of classical learning. Paul Oskar Kristeller defines Renaissance humanism as a philological and educational movement centered on the *studia humanitatis* (Kristeller). Charles Nauert emphasizes its civic and ethical orientation (Nauert). Yet these historiographic models treat humanism as an origin point—a foundational

moment from which modern subjectivity unfolds.

Such continuity narratives obscure rupture. Humanism does not pass seamlessly from Dante to Sartre. It mutates. It fractures. It re-emerges under pressure.

This article argues that literary humanism should be understood not as doctrinal continuity but as recurring reconfiguration. Whenever inherited structures of authority—divine, rational, imperial, or ideological—destabilize, literature reconstructs the human subject as a site of negotiation. The Renaissance reoriented the human within theology; the Enlightenment universalized rational agency; Romanticism interiorized consciousness; existentialism radicalized freedom; postcolonial literature pluralized dignity; postmodernism destabilized subject coherence. In each case, literature does not abandon the human—it redefines it.

Humanism persists because narrative requires agency. Without some form of accountable subjectivity, literature cannot sustain ethical stakes. Thus, literary humanism survives theoretical critique not as naive optimism but as structural necessity.

I. Renaissance Humanism and the Emergence of Literary Interiorization: Renaissance humanism is often characterized as a recovery of classical texts, yet its more

radical transformation lies in epistemology. The studia humanitatis privileged rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy over scholastic abstraction. Authority shifted from theological deduction to textual interpretation.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, we observe transitional humanism. The cosmos remains theologically ordered, yet the poem foregrounds individual moral accountability. The pilgrim's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise dramatizes the capacity of human reason to ascend toward understanding. Dante does not reject divine authority; rather, he intensifies human interpretive agency within it. The poem's elaborate allegory depends upon the reader's intellectual participation. The human becomes hermeneutic subject.

By Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, subjectivity undergoes deeper interiorization. *Hamlet's* soliloquies enact the fracture between consciousness and action. The famous meditation "To be, or not to be" dramatizes existential hesitation within a still-theological universe (Shakespeare). Agency is no longer seamless alignment with providence; it is deliberative struggle.

Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* extends this destabilization. *Quixote* inhabits competing narrative frameworks—chivalric fantasy and social realism. The novel exposes the fragility of interpretive authority. Human identity becomes narratively constructed. Cervantes thus anticipates modern reflexivity: the human is shaped by textual worlds.

Renaissance literary humanism therefore does not simply affirm dignity; it constructs interiority. The human subject becomes the locus of interpretation, conflict, and moral choice.

II. Enlightenment Rationality and Its Discontents: The Enlightenment universalizes humanist claims. Reason becomes a universal faculty, grounding rights and political reform. Yet literature during this period reveals cracks in rational optimism.

Voltaire's *Candide* satirizes philosophical determinism. The insistence that this is "the best of all possible worlds" collapses under relentless catastrophe (Voltaire). The novel exposes the insufficiency of abstract rationalism in the face of lived suffering.

The rise of the novel as dominant literary form parallels Enlightenment humanism. The narrative focus shifts toward individual development within social institutions. The human subject is historically embedded, economically situated, and socially constrained. Agency is negotiated rather than absolute.

Thus Enlightenment literary humanism expands universality while simultaneously revealing its limits.

III. Romantic Subjectivity and the Sublime Self: Romanticism reacts against Enlightenment abstraction by foregrounding emotion and imagination. Yet this reaction remains deeply humanist. If reason falters, creative interiority becomes redemptive.

In Goethe's *Faust*, striving defines humanity (Goethe). *Faust's* pact with Mephistopheles dramatizes boundless aspiration. The human becomes will in motion. Romantic humanism privileges authenticity and creative genius.

This transformation intensifies subjectivity. The human is not merely rational agent but existential depth. Romanticism therefore prepares the ground for existentialist radicalization.

IV. Existentialism and the Burden of Freedom: Twentieth-century catastrophe fractures Enlightenment confidence. Existentialism redefines humanism without metaphysical guarantees.

In Existentialism Is a Humanism, Sartre insists that humans create their own essence through action (Sartre). Freedom is unavoidable and absolute. Literature embodies this burden.

Albert Camus' *The Stranger* presents Meursault as emotionally detached from social expectation (Camus). His trial condemns not murder alone but refusal of narrative conformity. Yet the novel ultimately affirms lucidity: meaning emerges through conscious confrontation with absurdity.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* anticipates this crisis. Raskolnikov attempts to transcend moral law, only to discover psychological fragmentation (Dostoevsky). Freedom without ethical grounding becomes torment.

Existential literary humanism thus preserves dignity through responsibility rather than transcendence.

V. Postcolonial Reconfiguration: Pluralizing the Human: Postcolonial critique exposes the complicity of Enlightenment humanism with imperial power. If universality justified domination, can humanism be salvaged?

Edward Said defends a secular humanism grounded in critical self-reflection (Said). Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* embodies this reclamation (Achebe). The novel restores complexity to African subjectivity, challenging colonial caricature. Dignity becomes culturally situated rather than abstract universal.

Postcolonial literature does not discard humanism; it provincializes Europe and pluralizes humanity.

VI. Anti-Humanism and the Question of the Subject: Foucault's critique of Enlightenment subjectivity reframes the human as discursive product (Foucault). Althusser rejects humanism as ideological illusion (Althusser). Heidegger critiques metaphysical humanism for centering beings rather than Being (Heidegger).

Yet literature resists total erasure of subjectivity.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* dramatizes systemic dehumanization (Atwood). Offred's narration becomes survival. Even within postmodern skepticism, narrative voice asserts agency.

Thus anti-humanism destabilizes foundations but cannot eliminate narrative subjectivity.

VII. Humanism as Recurring Crisis-Formation: Across these periods, a pattern emerges: humanism

intensifies during moments of epistemic instability.

Renaissance: crisis of scholastic authority

Enlightenment: crisis of theological sovereignty

Romanticism: crisis of rational abstraction

Existentialism: crisis of metaphysical meaning

Postcolonialism: crisis of imperial universality

Postmodernism: crisis of subject coherence

Literature reconstructs the human each time. Humanism persists because narrative requires accountable agency.

Conclusion: The Persistence of the Human Question:

Literary humanism is not doctrinal continuity but dynamic reconfiguration. It survives because literature cannot relinquish the ethical problem of subjectivity. Even when philosophy dismantles the unified subject, narrative reconstructs agency in new forms.

As technological and ecological transformations redefine humanity, literature will once again renegotiate dignity and responsibility. Humanism persists not as ideology but as structural condition of storytelling.

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