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## **Posthumanism: A Study of Mark Twain's "A Dog's Tale"**

### **A B S T R A C T**

Posthumanism is a postmodernist theory which means beyond human beings. It has received attention in the last two decades of the twentieth century on. It emphasises the belief that it is not only man who monopolises the universe for his own welfare and benefits. In fact, there is no bias toward a species against the other species. According to this theory, he is no more at the center of the cosmos. The present study attempts to examine posthumanism in literature through studying its principles in Mark Twain's short story "A Dog's Tale". This paper handles the examination of certain qualities which are supposed to be confined to man but here they are granted to animals. The dog in this story is given an identity. She has humane attributes more than her master, the scientist, and his colleagues. This paper is divided into two sections. Section one is an introductory. It handles posthumanism, its characteristics and its relation with literature. In addition, it sheds the light upon the American writer Mark Twain as a posthumanist. Section two examines the features of the main characters in "A Dog's Tale" which make them having humane qualities and enable them to think and behave like intelligent creatures equivalent to humans in having the right to live decently and to be treated respectably and mercifully. The final part of the paper is the conclusion which sums up the results of the study.

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**ما بعد الإنسانية: دراسة لمارك توين "حكاية كلب"**

أ.م.د. شيماء عبد الله جاسم / جامعة تكريت / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية / قسم اللغة الانكليزية

#### **الخلاصة**

نظرية ما وراء الانسانية هي نظرية من نظريات ما بعد الحداثة و تعني ما وراء الكائن البشري. بدأ الاهتمام بهذه النظرية في العقدين الاخيرين من القرن العشرين تؤكد هذه النظرية على ان الكون ليس حكراً لسعادة و رفاهية الانسان فقط. في الحقيقة لا يوجد تحيز نحو صنف من المخلوقات ضد صنف

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آخر. وفقاً لهذه النظرية لم يعد الانسان مركزاً للكون كما كان الاعتقاد السابق. تتعلق الدراسة الحالية بتطبيق نظرية ما وراء الانسانية على قصة "حكاية كلب" للكاتب الامريكي مارك توين. يتناول البحث ايجاد الصفات البشرية التي وجدت في شخصيات الحيوانات في القصة. بطله القصة ايلين هي انثى كلب تتحدث عن قصتها في بيت عالم انقذت ابنه الرضيع من النيران الملتهبة لكنه تسبب في قتل جروها الحيد عندما ثقب رأسه للتجربة. تقسم الدراسة الى مبحثين. المبحث الاول مقدمة تتناول تعريف النظرية و خصائصها و علاقتها بالأدب. اما المبحث الثاني فهو دراسة لقصة "حكاية كلب" و صفات الذكاء و التحمل والاخلاص والوفاء والبطولة التي تتحلى بها بطله القصة على الرغم من انها حيوانٌ اعجم.

### 1.1. Introduction: Posthumanism

"وَمَا مِنْ دَابَّةٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا طَائِرٍ يَطِيرُ بِجَنَاحَيْهِ إِلَّا أُمَمٌ أَمْثَالُكُمْ" (سورة الانعام ٣٨)

"There is not a moving creature on earth, nor a bird that flies with its two wings, but are communities like you" Al-An'am 38 (Ali: 143).

Posthumanism is a postmodernist theory which has received attention in the 1990s on. In fact, it has produced an entire new way of thinking and theorizing. It is a concept originating in the fields of science fiction, contemporary art and philosophy. Literally, it means a person or entity that exists in a state beyond being human. This term appeared at the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s. Noteworthy to say this theory is considered as a second generation of the postmodernism. It brings to discussion the idea of human superiority and illustrates the privilege that some species has over another. This theory does not only give an honourable and respectable place for alive creatures but, it also highlights the role of technological intelligence in controlling the world.

The first academic publications were in the 1990s. It appeared as a critical concept in the writing of the authors N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Neil Badmington, and Eliane L. Graham. This theory does not debate the non-

centrality of the human race and giving vital roles to the other living creatures, but also theorizing the role of digital intelligence upon life and upon humanity. Stefan Herberchter says that the publication of Francis Fukuyaman's *Our Posthuman Future* (1999) about the importance of new biotechnologies opened up a more general political and philosophical discussions ( Herbrechter: vii).

Svitlana Matviyenko suggests that when Ihab Hassan introduced the term posthumanism in 1977, it was marked by a state of weakness and

disruption in face of rapid changing humanities. Ihab argues that humanism may be coming into an end yielding itself to the transformation which is called posthumanism. Matviyenko clarifies the importance of posthumanism saying that according to the psychoanalytical scenario it is only through loss that we experience lack. The loss of the centrality of humans represented by the shift away from humanist ideals, recalls a more profound and traumatic lack. Evoking a philosophical system in which humans ideate themselves as subjects to rather than creators of a worldview might be an awakening confrontation with "reimagine, resituate, and even recommend the effects of human decentralization in circumstances conceived to arise from a much broader and diverse set of possibilities" (Matviyenko: 1-2). However, Hassan discusses the contrast between modernism and postmodernism. He "contrasts modernist dehumanisation of art with the postmodernist sense of dehumanization of the Planet, and the end of Man" (Selden: 72). This is his comprehension of posthumanism.

Actually, the term "posthumanism" means "beyond" or "after" human, which briefly means going beyond the narrow view of humanism toward something else, something posthumanist. The theory includes a critical concept of the humanist traditions which put man as the measure of everything, and making him the center of investigation and concern (Horsthemke : 175).

According to Cary Wolfe, the prefix "post" does not mean after as it usually means in Latin (coming after). He gives it the meaning *beyond* "suggesting that beyond and beside humanism there exist alternatives" (Gajewska: 253).

Nonetheless, posthumanism might be seen as a critical concept which means the theory that rejects the recurring idea that humans are unique creatures and have the right to control the world as they like. In addition, it can be viewed as a philosophical approach since it involves a rethinking of the idea of human subjectivity, because it affirms the notion that humans share all life processes with animals and other life forms. It also calls for more inclusive and wide definition of life, greater moral response and responsibility to non-human life forms. Pramod K. Nayar thinks that critical posthumanism draws a connection between traditional human beings exclusionary strategy towards women, races or ethnic groups. In addition to animals, beings kept as slaves, monsters or mere providers of meat, entertainment or labour (Nayar : 8-9).

Amy Ratelle analyses Cary Wolfe's book *What is Posthumanism?*. She posits that Wolfe demonstrates that there are many writings about animals which call for upholding animals. But this is not enough. According to Wolfe "It is only by giving up notions of personhood that speciesism can be destabilized ...so that we can become posthumanists, and participate in any true form of interdisciplinary" (Ratelle: 150). Also, Wolfe believes in presenting the posthumanist issues through real examples. He believes this strengthens the viewpoints of the theory.

Tarr and Donna R. White suggest that posthumanists deny the humanist definition of human as exclusive, unique, exceptional, or naturally dominant. Instead, our intelligence, our bodies, our behaviours are all interconnected with other species and environment. We share the earth with many other creatures. Moreover, humans have created technologies that work organically. There many

animals which are more human than some people. Moreover, there are new technologies, which are not only think more wisely than we do but act more superior than we do. Therefore, rather than asking what does it mean to be human, it should be asking what does it mean to be posthuman (Tarr: 3).

Nietzsche's "revaluation of values" which dismisses the traditional distinction between truth and falsehood can be clarified according to posthumanism. His nihilistic, relativist, and provocative challenge to man is directed against triviality of humanism inspired by Christian values and his self-inflicted state of godlessness. He mocks the arrogance of mankind (Herbrechter: 2).

Tarr assumes that there are many branches of posthumanism. Among its types, there is popular posthumanism which reflects the fears of society of biotechnological changes. It deals with the question whether artificial intelligence replaces humans as dominant species. This fear is not new. In the past, people worried about their livelihoods: traditional hand-knitters protested against stock machines. Nowadays, people are worried about their jobs because robots can replace many jobs which require physical labour or clerking. Another type is transhumanism. It represents a response to popular posthumanism. It celebrates the human achievements in the field of technology (Tarr: 3-4). However, political posthumanism is a type of posthumanism which represents a reaction to transhumanism (Ibid.: 5).

It can be said that animals' rights were the concern of posthumanists from different prospects. This aspect of posthumanism is not just a self-righteous attack against vivisection and upbringing animals for meat and clothing, but also demonstrates a shift in general thinking, reflecting posthumanists' argument that barriers between people and animals have now started to collapse. Most of the

best known posthumanist scholars like Harway's cyborgs and companion species, Wolfe's *Animal Rites*, and Katherine Hayle's embodiment see themselves as the next generation after the anti-humanists of the 1970s and 1980's thinkers like Derrida and Foucault (Ibid.: 6-7).

Nonetheless, to enlighten the readers it should be noted that posthumanist studies help in taking a wider view of the universe beyond. It does not call for only studying it from within as a separate theory, but encourages researchers to look into its principle from outside (Iovino: 13). Claudia de Lima Costa presumes that posthumanism comes as a response to the current economic, political, cultural, ecological crises. It points out the actions of the human race towards the planet. In fact, its perspectives do not call for the end of humanism or to be anti-human (Costa: 10). Hence, Man must differentiate between his place as an intelligent creature and his desire to dominate the whole world. This is the obvious posthumanist message.

It is noteworthy that posthumanism is not a rejection of humanism. Indeed, it is a call for a philosophical framework that addresses the concern of "what it means to be human". Furthermore, posthumanism suggests a serious endeavour to enhance the merciful and sympathetic treatment between the living species human against human, and human against animal. It means that posthumanism is a way of upholding human beings to reframe their attitudes and concerns in a way that is less human-centric. For this purpose, it opens a new distance, new way of thinking and recreating the perception of human subjectivity, experience and ethical relations in ways that reflect new knowledge and concerns for non-human.

It should be pointed out that the main goal of the theory is not to remove the differences between human and non-human, but to accept and embrace species differences. Also, it is important for human beings to know that other species have their place in the universe and this must be accepted as a fact. In short, it is an anti-thesis to anthropocentrism.

## 1.2. Posthumanism and Literature

The connection between posthumanism and literature helps to have a wider view about the theory and understand it clearly. In addition, applying the effective principles of the theory upon real characters and events that have a closer look to reality gives a more apprehension of the theory beside scrutinising its value and significance.

Zoe Jaques in his book *Children's Literature and Posthuman* discusses children's fiction which includes posthuman indications. He says:

"It is surprising, in fact, how frequently posthuman scholarship includes tangential reference to children's literature, without making such fiction the sustained subject of enquiry. I see the imaginative and boundary-blurring nature of children's fiction as a location for shaping posthuman and proto-posthuman philosophy as much as a location for exploring the tensions occasioned by it... children's fiction offers a heretofore neglected resource for understanding cultures of the human and non-human and often questions the nature, parameters and dominion of humanity". (Zoe: 5-6).

Zoe believes that children's literature provides a rich background of posthuman references. The creature and animals in these stories are presented to negotiate the differences and sameness between what is human and what is nonhuman.

Teisha Seaman examines the differences between man and the others through showing what makes people special and different. With regard to animals, she explains, it is not necessary to have human organisms to have sentience. A prove of this, nobody would argue that a dog is incapable of sensing primal emotions like fear or sexual arousal, which is true of all organism, excluding plants and other creatures. "At any rate, whether or not a dog or an animal with similar characteristics to a dog is in possession of

humanity, the corresponding debate is saturated with evidence on both sides" (Seaman: 3).

Cary Wolfe also handles the possession of animals to sentience shared with human beings. But, people are still different from all the other species: "Just because we direct our attention to the study of nonhuman animals, and even if we do so with the aim of exposing how they have been misunderstood and exploited, that does not mean that we are not continuing to be humanist" (Wolfe 99).

Most Western thinkers consider the human to be unique. Usually, they clarify this uniqueness through comparisons with animals, machines, savages, and so on. Posthumanist perspectives denounce the humanist positioning of the non-white and non-Western as less than human. Also, posthumanist studies focus on continuities between the human and non-human. For most posthumanists what matters is the "interrogating the supposed differences between humans and other forms of "biological" life, especially animals, and particularly between human language and animal communication" (Snaza: 42-3).

The representation of posthumanist thoughts in contemporary literature has a great cultural significance, because of its importance to expose challenges of the theory in a notable and expressive way. Furthermore, the relation provides a clearer and more critical understanding of human beings in literature and shows the role of fiction in a genius way. Through using literature as a part of posthumanism will help to identify the major philosophical, political and existential prospects of human culture and community. Hence, applying the theory upon literature serves the goals and posthumanism.



## 1.2 Mark Twain as Posthumanist

Beside of being an essential figure in the American literature, Mark Twain (1835–1910) was one of the main proponents who rejected the vivisection against animals. Actually, animals have the leading roles in some of his works like "A Dog's Tale" (1903) and "A Horse's Tale" (1907). He let them speak, act, and show their suffering like humans. They think and give the readers the impression that they are good thinkers.

In fact, Twain adopted modern animal rights and posthumanist philosophies. Matthew Guzman explains Twain's prejudice to the rights of animal's. He suggests that some critics believe that beside Twain's hatred of vivisection, he wrote "A Dog's Tale" for the sake of his daughter Jean who herself denounced vivisectioning animals. However, in "The Lowest Animal" Twain renounces the Darwinian concept of the "Ascent of Man" from the lower animals. It seems it is an exaggeration from Twain's side to state that "since it now seems plain to me that that theory ought to be vacated in favor of a new and truer one... the Descent of Man from the Higher Animals" (Guzman: 30). In his essays and short stories, Twain rejects any harm done to these dumb creatures because of the pain they feel in the inhumane treatment by humans.

In addition, Twain railed against this social injustice, and remarkably anticipates posthumanist ideas that mark the "animal turn" in contemporary critical theory. This influence of posthumanism concepts was noticed in his writings that range from philosophical dogs dialoguing on the nature and worth of mankind, to provocative essays that expose the flaws of humanity, and even a sentimental narrative of a mother dog reflecting on her exploitation by the family who supposedly loved her. In fact, Twain overturned the popular assumption of "anthropocentric" that considers humans as superior creatures over other animals. His rejection of the painful experiments upon animals was shown in his writings where he inserted animal characters with voices: they have

their own discourse. They are empowered to tell their own stories. Twain's animal writings poses a philosophical challenge, as he puts it in one instance : "we are not as important, perhaps, as we had supposed we were". Because of this, Twain does not consider man is the center of the creation, and that in many ways, many human beings were inferior to other animals (Goldman: 112-13).

In his later work, Twain manifested a dark mood in his writing. However, sometimes his anger at the human race exploded in fits of comedy and social satire (Wonham: 367). In "A Dog's Tale" Twain presents a moving story told by a she-dog who narrates in her own way of discourse her experience in life. She loses her only puppy at the hands of her master, the ingrate scientist.

## **2.1. Humanlike Qualities in a Dog**

Posthumanism encounters human beings with the "others" whether they are technological or living creatures. In fact, people are continuing to be humanists in their attempts to understand animals in relation to themselves. Considering the fact that animals and human beings have lived side-by-side for as long as human beings have existed, it only makes sense that human beings have spent quite a lot of time contemplating the humanity of their wild counterparts. To answer the primary question of why humanity is understood in the context of human beings rather than in that of other biological organisms. It is because the concept of humanity has been created by humans, for humans, and based on the human experience. The enlarged context of posthumanism allows us to look at humanity by what humans are not; that is, animals or machines (Seaman: 4).

Mark Twain's " A Dog's Tale" reveals his attitude towards the abuse of animals in spite of their honesty and honourable traits. The dog, Aileen, is the main character in the story. Beside of being the narrator of the story from the very beginning , she plays a heroic part that portrait the story as an effective

sentimental tale. Aileen, the simple, trusting narrator, tells a story of human cruelty and ingratitude.

The story starts with the recognition of the dog to herself and her origin. She says, "I am a Presbyterian". She loves her mother and all those around her. She praises her because of her qualities. Recognition is one of Aileen Mavourneen's characteristics. She describes how she has learnt from her mother to be brave, honest, and helpful:

"from her we learned also to be brave and prompt in time of danger, and not to run away, but face the peril that threatened friend or stranger, and help him the best we could without stopping to think what the cost might be to us. And she taught us not by words only, but by example, and that is the best way and surest and most lasting."\*

(ADT.: 563).

Hence, she appears to have different qualities related to humans like love and passion which are the major feelings she reveals from the very beginning of the story. She loves her mother and the family adopted her. Also, she reveals an ability of thinking as an intelligent species. Her mother advises her before leaving to live in Mr. Gray's house. She explains her idea of existence in this world according to her mother's point of view: "we were sent into this world for a wise and good purpose, and must do our duties without repining, take our life as we might find it, live it for the best good of others, and never mind about the results" (Ibid.). This speech shows how she is wise and how she cares for 'others'. Not only love and passion Aileen has shown throughout the story, but also, she shows how kind-hearted she is, wise, loyal, carrying and intelligent.

\*Mark Twain. "A Dog's Tale". In *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays* (pp. 561-71). Literary Classics of the U.S., Inc., 1992. (Henceforth will be parenthetically cited within text as ADT ., followed by page number).

In fact, she shows her intelligence and loyalty when she risks her life to save her master's new born infant from the fire, although her life is in danger: "Before I could think, I sprang to the floor in my fright, and in a second was half-away to the door; but in the next half second my mother farewell was sounding in my ears, and I was on the bed again" (ADT.:566). Aileen rescues the baby. Guzman comments that Twain seems intentionally to make Aileen's first reaction to the fire on what could be called an "instinctive" flight reaction to danger. Then she overcomes this "instinct" by a moment of self-reflective thought. Instantly, she recalls her mother's words of helping others and to be gallant, not her actions. This may be because at this point, for Aileen, word and action represent the same idea. Gozman says "these two terms are not yet confused by human inconsistencies" (Gozman: 32).

But, the master hits her several times causing a limbed leg because he thinks she wants to destroy his child. "When the master's voice shouted: " 'Begone, you cursed beast "!" and I jumped to save myself ; but he was wonderfully quick, and chased me up, striking furiously at me with his cane" (ADT.: 566). He does not comprehend why she drags the baby out of his room until after some moments when the maid shouts announcing there is a fire in the nursery.

In her hiding place, she lurks waiting for the unknown destiny. The words Aileen Mavourneen says to describe her status then are very wise: "fears are worse than pains,— oh, much worse" (Ibid.: 567). Gray's action proves how he acts for his own sake, and despise the weak creature who helped his own infant he hit injures her leg making her limp for the rest of her life (Stoneley:109). Moreover, his ingratitude and ill-treatment before knowing the truth overshadows the killing of her puppy at his hands merely to prove his scientific assumption.

Aileen is happy in her life with the loving mistress and her daughter. Furthermore, she feels proud of her little puppy. She rejects the idea of fleeing from Gray's house for the puppy's sake: "what would life be without my puppy" (ADG.: 567). But, one day, Gray takes the puppy followed by his mother and pierces his head simply to prove his assumption to his colleagues forgetting all the things Aileen has done to his child.

"They discussed and experimented, and then suddenly the puppy shrieked, and they set him on the floor, and he went staggering around, with his head all bloody, and the master clapped his hands."  
(Ibid.: 569).

This scientist does not care for the suffering of the puppy and the pain caused by his cruel experiment. He does not regret his doing. He is jovial that he proves his idea: "There, I've won \_confess it! He's as blind as a bat!". Moreover, his colleagues congratulate him for his success:" 'you've proved your theory, and suffering humanity owes you a great debt from henceforth'... and they crowded around him, and wrung his hand cordially and thankfully, and praised him" (Ibid.). All these words are said in front of the puppy's mother. But, she does not comprehend what happens to her baby. What he wants to prove is that when an injury happens to the brain, it will cause blindness. He proves it through this puppy while it is alive.

Gray and the other scientists represent the opposite qualities. They are cruel and savage. Instead of being indebted to Aileen for saving his baby, Gray kills her baby. The footman observes her suffering: "he patted my head, and there were tears in his eyes, and he said, ' Poor little doggie, you SAVED *his* child." (ADT.: 570).

Aileen and her baby have the right to live and to be secure in their lives. What Gray has done is very savage and is not associated with any of the human traits like mercy, compassion and gratitude. Therefore, Aileen possesses these

high spiritual merits while the scientists are lacking what is supposed to be humane features.

## **2.2. Posthumanism in "A Dog's Tale"**

According to Seaman sentience, or the ability to subjectively comprehend one's own experiences, is a necessary feature of anything that has the potential to be considered human. Surely, it is not exclusively a trait of humanity. It is fair to claim that most animals are sentient. It is a fact that dog uses its senses to experience the world around (Seaman: 5).

Guzman argues that in "A Dog's Tale" the non-human characters mimic the human language. Aileen's mother is very interested in her human superiors' language. She shows off her knowledge of the new words she hears and presents them in the assemblies of her companions. However, it is only mimicking these words because she always gives a different meaning for the same word. Guzman thinks in showing that the dogs do not understand the human language, they understand it in their ways. Also, he observes "The dogs are noble in their actions, but these hounds lack a proper understanding of language and higher reasoning skills, two characteristics which are used as common justifications for humanity's rule over lower creatures (Guzman: 31-2).

Seaman argues that machines and animals differ from human beings in certain things which make man a distinguishable creature from the other species. Among these things are awareness, consciousness, and understanding death. She discusses the essence of humanity in terms of humanism. She says that in order to define humanity is by proving a profound connection between body and consciousness. A fully working consciousness appears to comprise a few specific aspects: the ability to process complex emotions (particularly empathy), sensation, and hesitance to act upon animalistic, or primitive, desires. Above all, animals do not comprehend morality. Moreover," because they have no concept

of death, they cannot share in an extremely significant part of the human experience" (Seaman: 6-7).

This is clearly found in Aileen's character. It seems that Twain is deliberately built her character in a way that the readers are always aware they are reading the story of a dog. After the death of her puppy, for instance, the servants notice that she always stays beside his grave. She thinks that he will grow like the seeds Gray's daughter planted earlier in the story. She spends a long time lying beside the puppy's grave waiting for him to come out grown up and more beautiful:

"I saw he was going to plant the puppy, and I was glad, because it would grow and come up a fine handsome dog, like Robin Adair {his father}... 'Poor doggie\_ do give it up and come home; *don't* break our hearts!' and all this terrified me the more, and makes me sure something has happened (ADT.: 570).

Guzman wonders at how Twain creates the dogs in such a way giving them human attributes unlike their human cohorts. However, it is clear while highlighting that these characters are not human in the same time.

Moreover, he provides proofs that these dogs are not intellectually superior or equal to the humans. Rather, he makes them morally superior to their human owners through Aileen's actions of goodness contrasting the with Gray's evil doings(Guzman: 32).

Hence, it is impossible to say animals are totally having the qualifications of human beings. Anyhow, what this study intends to deliver is that animals also have sensations and many other features. They feel and try to communicate their feelings to their masters or those around them. Nonetheless, Mark Twain achieves success in "A Dog's Tale" to convey his message about the innocence of the nonhuman characters and the cruelty of the scientists who use these animals alive mercilessly in their experiences to prove their ideas. There should

be mercy in treating the other creatures because they are existing in this world just like man.

## CONCLUSION

Posthumanism is a literary theory. It focuses upon refuting anthropocentrism. Man shares the universe with all the other species. It highlights the importance of living in equilibrium. There are many branches of posthumanism. It also deals with feminine issues calling for the equality among the human race. Also, it claims, animals are living beings that must be granted care and esteem. The posthumanists are against vivisection. They consider it as the most inhumane process. Although, they cannot communicate their suffering to us, but they do suffer. Therefore, this should be taken into consideration by humans.

Mark Twain in his later work deals with the issue of disapproving the cruelty of the scientific experiments against living animals. In his "A Dog's Tale", he presents his story through the eyes of a dog. Nonetheless, throughout the story readers are aware it is narrated by a dog. It is true that he gives Aileen a full name and makes her the mother of a small puppy, Robin, but she is still an animal who does not totally fathom the unique human rationality.

However, what Twain wants to do through giving Aileen Mavourneen an identity and humanlike qualities is not to make her be like or equal to her human masters but to individualise her. The animal narrator role enables Aileen to convey her suffering through different situations and to show the readers the puppy's pain after the experiment. Animals suffer if they are exposed to harmful experiments. Then, studying posthumanist clarifies the way things should be in a small world which is supposed to embrace all the living species in harmony,



welfare and peace. In fact, studying such theories through genuine literary text help in widening the researchers and readers' horizons in literature. Posthumanism calls for understanding its discourse through studying the other antitheses. This enriches our apprehension of the realm we share with the other creatures.

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