

Human ['hju:mən]

by Jacquelyn Christensen (Early Modern English)

Noun. One who has the characteristics of humans as compared to other beings or species.



Paula Modersohn-Becker. *Portrait of a Peasant Woman*, 1898–99. The Art Institute of Chicago

Every time we say *humanities*, we first say *human*. The word *human* labels what kind of being we are (not dogs, not angels). But *human* also describes us: our fallibility (human error), our creativity (human pretzel), and our innate goodness (human kindness). The humanities explore human experience, which can, in George Eliot’s words, enlarge or amplify our own “experience and extend our contact with our [fellow humans] beyond the bounds of our personal lot.” Eliot claimed that “art is the nearest thing to life.”¹ Her term *art* encompasses what we do in the humanities, and this art can—and should—change us.

Early uses of the word *humanity* mean “the quality of being humane.”² *Humane* was, until the 18th century, a variant spelling of *human*. The meaning we now associate with *humane* is closely related to the Latin word *humanus*, meaning “characteristic of people, civilized, cultured, cultivated, kindly, considerate, merciful, indulgent.”³ Relatedly, humane learning was seen as that which would civilize and better students. Even now, we study humanities seeking to be better.

Latin also had a word for the opposite, *inhumanus*, which we have taken as *inhuman*, “destitute of natural kindness or pity; brutal, unfeeling, cruel.”⁴ Shakespeare used *inhuman* for his worst villains: Lady Anne calls Richard (who will become Richard III) “inhuman”⁵ and Roderigo calls Iago an “inhuman dog” when he finally sees Iago for what he is.⁶ How chilling that we humans can turn from our humanity!

We study the humanities to develop compassion for others. At the end of *The Tempest*, Prospero listens to the spirit Ariel admit that his “affections would become tender”⁷ for the shipwrecked nobles “were [he] human.”⁸ Ariel is setting himself apart from humans, but he is also describing an essential characteristic of humans: humans feel compassion. Ariel’s plea to Prospero is the moment that diverts Prospero from

his revenge plot. In that moment, Prospero turns away from inhumanity and chooses to join humanity again.

We study the humanities to make ourselves more human. George Eliot argued that what we gain from art is “the extension of our sympathies.” In particular, she said, “a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves.”⁹ As we study the humanities, we grow in the ability to attend to others, to understand what is apart from ourselves.

Each of us can meet only a few people in this life, and most of them will be more or less like us—they will live at the same time, perhaps in the same place, maybe have similar lives. But humanity is much broader, much deeper, than the few people we know. When we study the humanities, we study from the inside what it meant to be human in the distant past, what it means to be human in diverse cultures, what it means to be human far “beyond the bounds of our personal lot.” And with that knowledge we can become not only human but truly humane. ■

1. George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *George Eliot Archive*, www.georgeeliotarchive.org.

2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “humanity,” www.oed.com.

3. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “human.”

4. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “inhuman.”

5. *Richard III*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 1.2.62. References are to act, scene, and line.

6. *Othello*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 5.1.74.

7. *The Tempest*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 5.1.23–24.

8. *The Tempest*, 5.1.26.

9. George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life.”