



## Cancer a Bridge Towards Posthumanism in Edson's Wit

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**Article Citation:** Talley, S. , Mansouri, Y. (2022). Cancer a Bridge Towards Posthumanism in Edson's Wit, *Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies*, 3 (3): 1–7.

**Received Date:** October 22, 2022

**Accepted Date:** November 18, 2022

**Online Date:** December 26, 2022

**Publisher:** Kare Publishing

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E-ISSN: 2667-6214



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### ABSTRACT

Scholarly debates over the definition of humanism has shifted in recent years due to the rapid improvement of technology. The spread of technology was a turning point in the history of literature that can be traced in literary works of Victorian era or even earlier, in which the meaning of human is in relation with science and technology and one may probe the root of posthumanism in those times. Posthumanism does not just necessarily emphasize transformation of human, it can be transcendence or transformation of human beings, too. One of the notions of post humanism is the role of technology to remove limitations and difficulties. Biotechnology according to posthumanism is used to improve human's condition better and in this play Jason the student of biochemistry tries to enhance the physical condition of Vivian who is suffering a chronic cancer, however, this study mirrors another factor of post humanism that is interrogation of humanism which is mirrored in Margaret Edson's Wit.

**Keywords:** posthumanism, technology, individualism, non-unitary, interrogation of humanity.

### 1. Introduction

Individualism of human being who used to believe to be at the center of the universe is questioned in some recent theories such as post humanism since man is connected to science and technology. New inquiries of such thinkers as Ihab Hassan, Francesca Ferrando and Rosi Braidotti have criticized the old definitions of humanity and has discussed decentered human and is beyond human limitations. Hassan is one of the critics who has portrayed the connection between postmodernism and posthumanism. Moreover, it is believed that he was the one who coined the word posthuman: "Debates on the 'posthuman' have been dealing with these tensions from the moment the notion was coined by literary scholar Ihab Hassan in 1977, at an expanding scale across the humanities and sciences." (Jansen et al 216) Another outstanding posthumanist critic, Rosi Braidotti, describes posthumanism as: "The focus is shifted accordingly from unitary to nomadic subjectivity, thus running against the grain of high humanism and its contemporary variations." (49) She is questioning the old definitions of individualism which can be highlighted in Edson's wit. Francesca Ferrando is another noticeable posthumanist critic who divides posthumanism in different categories since she believes that there is no holistic definition, however, the main idea is decentering human beings which is mirrored in Vivian character who has lost her central position of a professor in a class.

The writers of this article discuss the posthuman aspects of Vivian, the protagonist of Wit by Margaret Edson. Vivian's transformation from an individual who was living in her own shell to one who is dependent on nurses and doctors.

Margaret Edson, a Pulitzer Prize winner playwright, worked as “an oncology/AIDS patient clerk and volunteer social worker at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. She witnessed protocols being developed to treat patients for ovarian cancer and HIV” (Stripling 113) and while she was a nurse she decided to write *Wit*. Like her character in the story, Edson has had good academic knowledge. She has studied Renaissance History in 1983 and she was conscious about the human centered world, mirrored by the artists in past. After earning her master degree, she started teaching in public schools.

As a result of portrayal of an educated professor who is suffering a serious illness, *Wit* is analyzed by different critics such as Adrienne Martini who believes that it is about redemption since Edson has portrayed Vivian as a sick person who seeks God in her death bed to come to peace before her death. Martha Greene Eads clarifies the same idea of redemption in *Wit* in her article “Unwitting Redemption in Margaret Edson's *Wit*” which mirrors the fact that the ambiguous reflection of religion shows that the characters are seeking redemption unwittingly. considering the religious argument of Edson's *Wit*, one can refer to Chad Wriglesworth's “Theological Humanism as Living Praxis: Reading Surfaces and Depth in Margaret Edson's *Wit*” who has hold out that this work of art can be read in the light of “theological humanism as an interpretive and lived stance in the world.” (210) Rosette C. Lamonte discusses the “reconciliation of opposites” such as “death and sensuality” (570) in “Coma versus Comma: John Donne's Holy Sonnets in Edson's *WIT*”. Christine M. Gottlieb in her “Pedagogy and the Art of Death: Reparative Readings of Death and Dying in Margaret Edson's *Wit*” represents the fact that “wit provides lessons about knowledge-making and reading practices in the field of health humanities.” (1) Ellen Foster emphasizes in “A Rigorous Mind Meets Her Yielding Body: Intellectual Life and Meaning-Making in *Wit*” the fact that patients “make sense of new experiences, to integrate them within their bodies of knowledge.” (353) Noticeably Elizabeth Klaver argues that Vivian “an English-professor-cum-cancer-patient who must navigate the frightening territory of dying while on the stage of a modern research hospital.” (660) In addition, Therese Jones points out “the roles of theory, teaching, learning, and art in the medical humanities.” (395) However, the present article highlights the posthuman elements in Edson's *Wit* to mirror the role of technology and the relationship between human and science.

The present article holds out the very fact that science and technology are playing an important role in understanding and defining human beings. The self-centered human being is questioned and removed by pothumanist thinkers and critics and instead they highlight a man whose subjectivity is not important. Moreover, the boundaries which cause limitations are eliminated, so human and non-human, human and technology and ... are all in relation with others. Edson's *Wit* is open to different interpretations that are mentioned, however, this article is arguing this great work of art in the light of posthumanism. To do so, we mostly resort to the inquiries of some posthuman critics such as Rosi Braidotti and Francesca Ferrando to redefine the notion of “the human.”

## 2. New Outlooks Towards “The Human”

Living at the age of developments of science and technology, new philosophical ideas has emerged to define human being in relation with the time of technology and environment. Resorting to ideas of thinkers and critics such as Braidotti and Ferrando, who like most contemporary critics who refuted the finite definitions. They put the dualisms of human/nonhuman, natural/ artificial, science/religion and etc in question to redefine the human in current state of human beings. Braidotti points out that “posthuman theory is a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age known as ‘anthropocene.’” (5) She defines Anthropocene as “the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet.” (5)

Braidotti introduces three strands of posthumanist ideas: “the first comes from moral philosophy and develops a reactive form of the posthuman; the second, from science and technology studies, enforces an analytic form of the posthuman; and the third, from my own tradition of anti-humanist philosophies of subjectivity, proposes a critical post-humanism” (38) and she presents that “the primary task for posthuman critical theory therefore is to draw accurate and precise cartographies for these different subject positions as spring-boards towards posthuman recompositions of a panhuman cosmopolitan bond.” (53) Braidotti advocates posthumanism since it can help one to find the right position in society.

She also believes that posthumanism makes one to think about the principles “of our interaction with both human and non-human agents on a planetary scale.” (6) She clarifies this idea by referring to “nomadic subjectivity” which versus “unitary” one, she asserts that in this time the former is celebrated since individualism is refuted. (49) Furthermore, she adds that “a posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism.” (49-50) Serenella Iovino stresses that “Posthumanism is a way of seeing agency that does not emphasize the single agents but their inextricable connection in “a new relational ontology.” (58)

According to Braidotti Innovative and critical ways of defining “who and what we are actually in the process of becoming” is strongly suggested in posthuman era (12) and the limitations of humanistic theory in knowing human as it is was one of key reasons of existence of posthumanism in this age: “Humanism's restricted notion of what counts as the human is one of the keys to understand how we got to a post-human turn at all.” (16) In addition, she announces

that posthumanism mirrors the new alternatives of so it puts an end to the “opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism.” (37) Braidotti presents that the “anti-humanist death of Wo/Man which marks the decline of some of the fundamental premises of the Enlightenment” and Braidotti celebrates posthumanism since it not only declares the historical declination of humanism but also represents “elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject.” (37) She emphasizes that “the posthumanist position I am defending builds on the anti-humanist legacy, more specifically on the epistemological and political foundations of the poststructuralist generation, and moves further.” (38) Furthermore, she states that:

The alternative views about the human and the new formations of subjectivity that have emerged from the radical epistemologies of Continental philosophy in the last thirty years do not merely oppose Humanism but create other visions of the self. Sexualized, racialized and naturalized differences, far from being the categorical boundary-keepers of the subject of Humanism, have evolved into fully fledged alternative models of the human subject. (Braidotti 38)

Furthermore, Braidotti emphasizes the effect of technology and improvements in science in redefinition of human notion, due to the fact that the life of human in this age has gone under major alterations thanks to scientific and technological improvements. She mentions that “technological intervention upon all living matter creates a negative unity and mutual dependence among humans and other species.” (40) Braidotti present universalism as one of the main outcomes of posthumanism which questions racism and nationalism:

The posthuman turn can support and enhance this project in so far as it displaces the exclusive focus on the idea of Europe as the cradle of Humanism, driven by a form of universalism that endows it with a unique sense of historical purpose. The process of becoming-minoritarian or becoming nomad of Europe involves the rejection of the self-appointed missionary role of Europe as the alleged center of the world. If it is the case that a socio-cultural mutation is taking place in the direction of a multi-ethnic, multi-media society, then the transformation cannot affect only the pole of ‘the others’. It must equally dislocate the position and the prerogative of ‘the same’, the former centre. The project of developing a new kind of post-nationalist nomadic European identity is certainly challenging in that it requires dis-identification from established, nation-bound identities. This project is political at heart, but it has a strong affective core made of convictions, vision and active desire for change. We can collectively empower these alternative becoming. (53-54)

The other, the center and the same are questioned and the nomadic subject is celebrated.

“Established practices and definitions of subjectivity” are originated by “the current scientific revolution, led by contemporary bio-genetic, environmental, neural and other sciences.” (Braidotti 54) Post human principles encourages the human to reject the “thought that the humanist past has institutionalized” and instead of that provokes the “complexities and paradoxes of our times.” (Braidotti 54) The subjectivity that Braidotti praises “becomes an expanded relational self, engendered by the cumulative effect of the social, psychic and ecological environments.” (60)

Braidotti argues that the restricted definition of human is not acceptable and “the relational capacity of the posthuman subject is not confined within our species,” (60) he emphasizes that the new definition of human “includes all non-anthropomorphic elements. Living matter – including the flesh – is intelligent and self-organizing, but it is so precisely because it is not disconnected from the rest of organic life.” (60) Rosi announces that due to the fact that human is not separated from the world outside, she does not “work completely within the social constructivist method but rather emphasize the non-human, vital force of Life.” (60) In this age human is defined in relation with nonhuman and its environment. Considering human connected to nonhuman, animals, earth, machines and etc, Braidotti has discussed the production of new subjectivities which she has labeled as “becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine” (66):

My focus is on the productive aspects of the posthuman predicament and the extent to which it opens up perspectives for affirmative transformations of both the structures of subjectivity and the production of theory and knowledge. I have labelled these processes as ‘becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine’... Thus, the becoming-animal axis of transformation entails the displacement of anthropocentrism and the recognition of transspecies solidarity on the basis of our being environmentally based, that is to say embodied, embedded and in symbiosis with other species. (Braidotti 66-67)

Braidotti highlights that in each process of alteration one criteria is emphasized in “the planetary or becoming-earth dimension brings issues of environmental and social sustainability to the fore, with special emphasis on ecology and the climate change issue.” (66) Considering the becoming-machine one can see the link between man and technology, Braidotti states that “the becoming-machine axis cracks open the division between humans and technological circuits, introducing biotechnologically mediated relations as foundational for the constitution the subject.” (66) Regarding becoming-animal process Braidotti announces that “post-anthropocentrism displaces the notion of species hierarchy and of a single, common standard for ‘Man’ as the measure of all things.” (67) Moreover, “we need to rethink dogs, cats and other sofa-based companions today as cutting across species partitions not only

affectively, but also organically, so to speak. As nature–cultural compounds, these animals qualify as cyborgs that is to say as creatures of mixity or vectors of posthuman relationality.” (Braidotti 73) Furthermore, Haraway accentuates “the need for new images, visions and representations of the human–animal continuum. She proposes to start rethinking human–animal interaction from the hybrid figuration of on comouse.” (Braidotti 74-75) Haraway underlines the fact that becoming-animal creates a human who “is both a victim and a scapegoat, a Christ-like figure that sacrifices herself in order to find the cure for breast cancer and thus save the lives of many women: a mammal rescuing other mammals. Because the oncomouse breaks the purity of lineage, she is also a spectral figure.” (Braidotti 75)

### 3. Posthuman Elements in *Wit*

The writers of this article inquiries into how Edson’s *Wit* can be read in the light of posthumanism that pulls human from its closed unitary position, so it can participate in relationship with others. Edson portrays Vivian as a woman who is alone “Devoid of friends, lovers, and family, she is the unfortunate stereotype of the repressed and isolated English professor—so obsessive about her scholarship (she is, after all, both “demanding” and “uncompromising”) that she fails to connect meaningfully with other human beings.” (Jones 400) However, this changes when she is hospitalized. She begins to learn how to communicate. This can be traced in different parts of the play, due to the fact that Vivian changes her style of speaking to be able to live in harmony with other living beings.

Edson represents that there is “the standard greeting” (Edson 14) in hospitals, “How are you feeling today? Great,” (Edson 14) and portrays Vivian, a university professor, as a character who is sensitive about her language “That’s just great. (In her own professorial tone) This is not my standard greeting, I assure you. I tend toward something a little more formal, a little less inquisitive, such as, say, “Hello.” But it is the standard greeting here. There is some debate as to the correct response to this salutation.” (Edson 14) The individual human, who used to be isolated, seeks being able to be connected to others. “JASON: Okay. Look. Gotta go. Keep pushing the fluids. Try for 2,000 a day, okay? VIVIAN: Okay. To use your word. Okay.” (Edson 65) She has changed her own method of speaking in order to be understood by others. She feels the necessity of creation of a new language in modern era.

Edson has portrayed Dr. Bearing as a posthuman figure in various scenes, for instance the way she analyze John Donne’s “And death shall be no more, *comma*, Death thou shalt die.” (Edson 23) she states that “Nothing but a breath—a comma—separates life from life everlasting. It is very simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on a stage, with exclamation points. It’s a comma, a pause.” (Edson 23) She mentions that the notion of death has changed, “death is no longer something to act out on a stage.” (Edson 23) She is questioning the old definition that is not acceptable in the posthuman time and gives a simple definition that describes death as “Nothing but a breath—a comma—separates life from life everlasting.” (Edson 23) She simplifies the notion of death to present the fact that the posthuman era helps to communicate more easily without philosophizing due to the very fact that scientific and biotechnological improvements play an important role in this time.

A posthuman ethics for “a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism.” (Braidotti 49) Considering this notion, Vivian is mirrored as one who used to live in her own world in which just her individuality matters as a notion in humanism but she is turning to a transhuman since she cannot live independently in her present situation. At the doctor’s office, Vivian reveals the fact that she has no one to share her critical situation with: “KELEKIAN: (Giving her a piece of paper) Here is the informed-consent form. Should you agree, you sign there, at the bottom. Is there a family member you want me to explain this to? VIVIAN: (Signing) That won’t be necessary.” (Edson 4) Vivian is mirrored as a human who stresses her individuality and does not intend to communicate with others, however, after being hospitalized, she turned to behave more like a posthuman, and she compares senior and young doctors “The young doctor, like the senior scholar, prefers research to humanity. At the same time the senior scholar, in her pathetic state as a simpering victim, wishes the young doctor would take more interest in personal contact.” (Edson 66) Vivian is longing for the doctors who are care about “personal contact” (Edson 66) to be able to communicate. Furthermore, she refers to having “flashback” (Edson 66): “Now I suppose we shall see, through a series of flashbacks, how the senior scholar ruthlessly denied her simpering students the touch of human kindness she now seeks.” (Edson 66) which can be considered as questioning the old definitions of humanism which do not admit the fact that human is in need of the “human kindness.” (Edson 66)

Indeed, as shown in *Wit*, human is understood using science and biotechnology. Jason describes the way cancer works: “How does [cancer] do it? . . . You grow normal cells in tissue culture in the lab, and they replicate just enough to make a nice, confluent monolayer .... You grow cancer cells, and they never stop.” (Edson 46) Science helps Vivian to understand her illness and then she compares it to the way that she has discussed John Donne’s poetry. She is a posthuman character who describes cancer as “awesome” (Edson 45), however, she is not describing the cancer as “awesome”, and she may has had the power of technology in her mind while she was talking about cancer.



Talking about cancer, some posthuman critics such as Haraway mention the fact that a person who is suffering cancer “is both a victim and a scapegoat, a Christ-like figure that sacrifices herself in order to find the cure for breast cancer and thus save the lives of many women: a mammal rescuing other mammals. Because the oncomouse breaks the purity of lineage, she is also a spectral figure.” (Braidotti 75) Vivian is portrayed as a victim who has been sacrificed to rescue other human. Klaver noticeably mentions that “Even if we no longer completely believe that a sick (wo) man is like a poorly made clock, mechanistic theories of the body have been instrumental in the development of empirical sciences such as medicine.” (663) “Descartes’s metaphor of machines, clocks, and automatons” (Klaver 663) is a posthuman idea which defines human’s body as an object which is produced by scientific and technological improvements.

Considering the ending of the play, Vivian is portrayed as a posthuman who is dependent on other people such as the nurse (Susie) and her professor. The unified existence of the human is questioned, since the human was unified and praised for that, however, in this time science reject this definition and asks for a disunited definition to be able to understand the human better. Furthermore, in another part the word “connected” is written in italics to emphasize the entanglement of human beings with non-human that in this drama can be medical technology and medicine. She comes to the very point that she could not be understood apart from the technology which has discovered her illness and has offered the cure. Moreover, being connected to other humans such as doctors and nurses is depicted. Vivian has been portrayed as a posthuman who is not only is defined by science but also is defined by the doctors and nurses. Her character has changed from a university professor and now she has turned to a human who is dependent on others.

Another notion that is discussed in posthumanism is the role of technology to remove limitations and difficulties. Biotechnology according to posthumanism is used to improve human's condition better and in this play Jason the student of biochemistry tries to enhance the physical condition of Vivian who is suffering a chronic cancer. “VIVIAN: Thank you. Were you an English major? JASON: No. Biochemistry. But you can’t get into medical school unless you’re well-rounded.” (Edson 30)

In addition, technology transforms human beings from human to posthuman by enhancing human psychological capacities, in this play Vivian expresses this notion of post humanism by labeling “course of treatment.... Highly educational” and learning to suffer which improves one’s psychological condition. One thing can be said for an eight-month course of cancer treatment: it is highly educational. I am learning to suffer. (Edson 40) Braidotti demonstrates that “the point about posthuman relations, however, is to see the inter-relation human/animal as constitutive of the identity of each.”(79) The posthuman identity changes to eliminate the boundaries. This play mirrors Professor Bearing as the one whose identity changes gradually to enable her to fight the disease and elevate her physical and psychological condition.

Jason describes Professor Bearing as a “very highly regarded on campus. It looked very good on my transcript that I had taken her course” (Edson 39) and later after being hospitalized she describes her situation: “it was embarrassing to have to wear a nightgown all day long— two nightgowns!—but that seemed like a positive privilege compared to watching myself go bald. Yes, having a former student give me a pelvic exam was thoroughly degrading—and I use the term deliberately—but I could not have imagined the depths of humiliation that” (Edson 40) In addition , at the end of the play she is portrayed as a child who is dependent on others as posthumanism defines posthuman beings. “SUSIE: Vivian. It’s all right. I know. It hurts. I know. It’s all right. Do you want a tissue? It’s all right. (Silence) Vivian, would you like a Popsicle? VIVIAN: (Like a child) Yes, please.” (Edson72) In order to be able to communicate, the nurse Susi is treating Vivian like a child. Vivian walked to the doctor’s office as a university professor, however, at the end of the play, she was portrayed as a child who fell asleep by listening to a childish story “The Runaway Bunny.” (Edson 85)

It is noticeable that Vivian was living alone and was emphasizing her own individuality by claiming to be independent and being able to continue her life without relying on others but when she is hospitalized she is physically isolated to make her strong enough to be able to live with other living and nonliving beings as a posthuman. Moreover, as a posthuman she is learning the fact that she cannot live independently. In her new condition she depends crucially on her environment and other living beings. “KELEKIAN: You’re doing so well. Isolation is no problem. Couple of days. Think of it as a vacation. (Edson 54) VIVIAN: (To audience) In isolation, I am isolated. For once I can use a term literally. The chemotherapeutic agents eradicating my cancer have also eradicated my immune system. In my present condition, every living thing is a health hazard to me ... (Edson 54) If she is not taken care of by the doctors and nurses, she will die due to her illness. Noticeably Vivian mentions that: “But I flatter myself. The article will not be about me, it will be about my ovaries”(Edson 60) which highlights the very fact that individuality of subject is questioned and the self-centered being has accepted that her subjectivity is not important at all.

In another part of the play when one of Professor Bearing’s students asks about the complicity of John Donne’s language, she answers that: “Perhaps he is suspicious of simplicity. Then, the student says: Perhaps, but that’s pretty stupid. Well, if he’s trying to figure out God, and the meaning of life, and big stuff like that, why does he keep running away, you know?” (Edson 68) This student is pictured as a posthuman who announces that posthuman is

embodied in an extended technological world and cannot be separated from its environment, therefore running away is impossible.

This article mirrored the posthuman principles in *Wit*, however, one can see that the author, Edson, is portraying some negative aspects of posthumanism, too. When Susi is explaining about two codes "full code" to be resuscitate or "DNR" that means "if your heart stops we'll ... well, we'll just let it" (Edson 74), she describes Kelekian and Jason as intelligent doctors who "like to save lives. So anything's okay, as long as life continues. It doesn't matter if you're hooked up to a million machines. Kelekian is a great researcher and everything. ... But they always ... want to know more things." (Edson 74-75) Actually, Susi is calling them "a great researcher and everything" (Edson 75) not great human who cares about others and is criticizing them for desiring to "know more things" (Edson 75) without caring about people. Moreover, she uses the adjective "million machines" (Edson 74) to describe the medical equipment and she believes that the patient is "hooked up" (Edson 74) in a fatal situation and the doctors, who are posthuman, do not care about anything except learning more. Furthermore, when Vivian is talking about her cancer and whether it is curable or not, Susi says that:

Well, they thought the drugs would make the tumor get smaller, and it has gotten a lot smaller. But the problem is that it started in new places too. They've learned a lot for their research. It was the best thing they had to give you, the strongest drugs. There just isn't a good treatment for what you have yet, for advanced ovarian. I'm sorry. They should have explained this—(Edson 74)

Susi is represented as the one who is against posthumanism and she believes that the doctors and scientists are not honest with people. Susi "is the only member of the hospital staff who treats Vivian Bearing with respect and kindness," (Lamont 574) and when Vivian's heart stops beating "Susi makes sure her file states DNR (DO NOT RESUSCITATE)" (Lamont 574): "SUSIE: WHAT ARE YOU DOING? JASON: A GODDAMN CODE. GET OVER HERE! SUSIE: She's DNR! (*She grabs him.*) JASON: (*He pushes her away.*) She's Research! SUSIE: She's NO CODE! (*SUSIE grabs JASON and hurls him off the bed.*)" (Edson 87-88) Lamont mentions that "Edson's ear is tuned to the lie. Medicine can be a kind of lie if one pretends to believe that a couple of days of survival, at the price of unbearable suffering, has value." (574) She stresses that patients do not have the chance to have "an existential choice" (Lamont 574) and she believes that the treatment does not help the patient, it is only for "medical profession, for the possible advance of science." (Lamont 574) However, Vivian, a sample of posthuman character, reveals the fact that she knew that there is no definite treatment for her illness: "VIVIAN: I knew. SUSIE: You did. VIVIAN: I read between the lines." (Edson 74)

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article the writers have underlined Posthumanism elements and their effects on the major character "Vivian Bearing" who is suffering from cancer. The posthumanism undermines the boundaries between human and non-human, human and technology, human and animal and by eliminating the boundaries helps human beings to know themselves better. The human who has been defined as disunited and imperfective, therefore will change the perspective to understand everything better. Furthermore, science and technology enhance the human's chance to communicate by helping human to leave the unitary situation and joining others.

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