

Human knowledge in hawksmoor and arcadia: a comparison



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Hannah, a character from *Arcadia*, asserts, "It's all trivial...it's wanting to know that makes us matter", a statement which suggests that the need for knowledge is an essential part of human nature. Stoppard and Ackroyd explore this concept through themes such as emotion vs. Intellect, the concept of ignorance, learning and teaching and the effect of the texts on the audience, but while Stoppard argues for human knowledge, Ackroyd is more ambiguous and questions its necessity further.

The main dichotomy explored is emotion vs. intellect. In *Arcadia*, the garden symbolises this conflict, as it represents "the decline from thinking to feeling" and "the Age of Enlightenment [being] banished into the Romantic wilderness": the intellectual shift in Europe as emotion overpowered intellect. Lady Croom attacks this scheme cuttingly, wondering at the need for a wilderness of a garden when classical, rational order is more appealing; thus, it seems at first that Stoppard is criticising the new garden and the Romantic Movement. This impression is enhanced when Thomasina criticises Cleopatra for falling in love and allowing a great library to be burned, thus favouring intellect over emotion. Later, she carelessly says "let them elope, they cannot turn back the advancement of knowledge", again showing her to be unsympathetic towards love and more interested in scientific progress. However, the characters in *Arcadia* that represent Classicism, such as Septimus and Hannah, fall in love in the play and abandon their classical reserve, thus implying that emotion is superior to intellect. Moreover, Thomasina, who is so concerned with human knowledge and is aware that "carnal embrace addle[s] the brain", passionately states that she must learn the waltz - a romantic dance - and eventually falls in love with Septimus,

again suggesting emotion is superior to intellect. Conversely, Stoppard uses the schoolroom - which symbolises "reverence for learning and the exaltation of knowledge" - as the main setting, thus presenting intellect to be significant, despite the conflict in the garden. However, the schoolroom is also the setting for gossip, comic arguments, discovering love and the final waltz, thus suggesting that, ultimately, emotion and intellect are inseparable.

Hawksmoor, on the other hand, at first appears to disregard intellect completely; Dyer mocks the Age of Enlightenment and scientific advancement, arguing that London is "a Hive of Noise and Ignorance" rather than progressive, and that the human autopsies Wren delights in will not teach him human nature. Joyce Carol states that: "Dyer's is the voice of the most despairing (and exulting) anti-intellectualism, a throwback to medieval notions of the necessary primacy of the irrational; Wren's is the civilized voice in which we should like to believe." Her criticism implies that Ackroyd favours emotion over intellect. Also, Ackroyd presents Wren as - despite all his progressiveness - ignorant, so we are less likely to support his "Sensible Knowledge"; furthermore, Hawksmoor - a rationalist who focuses on "the facts" and "the principles of reason and of method" - is eventually converted to Dyer's mysticism. However, although Dyer scorns intellect, he is human and cannot eliminate the thirst for knowledge from his nature. Moreover, many critics (and Ackroyd himself) have said that Hawksmoor is "primarily a novel of ideas" and "an intellectual puzzle" and does not focus on human emotion, and therefore indirectly favours intellect over emotion, unlike Arcadia.

Both texts also explore the concept of ignorance and our perception of it. Stoppard explores how knowledge can be used for destructive means – “bombs and aerosols” – and how knowledge can seem worthless: Bernard argues that “we were quite happy with Aristotle’s cosmos” and that it is not necessary to understand the ways of the universe. Furthermore, the biggest discovery in the play, that the “Universe will cease and grow cold”, is just a discovery, not a solution; also, the biggest tragedy in the play is the irreversibility of time: Thomasina will die and we, the audience, can do nothing about it, just as no one can prevent the extinction of our species. Therefore, Stoppard questions the purpose of knowledge when we cannot change anything. On the other hand, human knowledge is still a necessity because it is in our nature to need and want it. Thus, even as Thomasina realizes our extinction is inevitable, she does not regret her knowledge; instead, she cheerfully states that she wishes to learn to waltz, showing that acquiring knowledge is still an intrinsic part of her nature. Even if the knowledge is “trivial”, even if “failure is final”, we still want to learn; ignorance is terrible because it means that we have acquired nothing since we were born. As Hannah says, “it’s wanting to know that makes us matter”, even if the knowledge is inconsequential or futile.

Ackroyd, however, suggests that knowledge is no more useful than ignorance and that we will always know less than we think. Dyer dismisses all Wren’s discoveries as “Fopperies”; for all his advancement, Wren cannot save his son or eradicate the superstitions in London. The churches symbolize our state of ignorance; Dyer builds them in such a way that they are “intricate labyrinth[s]” and are full of secrets which emphasize how

much we don't know. Our ignorance is also portrayed through the story of Faustus: the Devil tricked him, and Ackroyd seems to suggest we have also been tricked - we are so pleased with our advancement and progress, but how much do we really know? Moreover, even if Hawksmoor realizes the cause of the murders, his knowledge will not help him transcend the boundaries of time; therefore, even if we did know more, what use would it be? Ackroyd implies that ignorance is inevitable and human knowledge is worthless.

Human knowledge is also explored through the effects of the texts on the audience. In Hawksmoor, we have more knowledge than the characters. First-person narrative makes us complicit in Dyer's schemes and gives us knowledge of the murders that the detective, Hawksmoor, doesn't have. Furthermore, we are aware of links between the times - such as the superstitions, the children and the tramps, and similarities between characters - and therefore are aware of a future which Dyer does not realize. However, the novel has a labyrinthine structure and is disorientating - the repetition of names, places and events increases the plot's ambiguity, while the use of unfamiliar language and intertextuality decreases our understanding of the text. While Ackroyd may have used this structure to symbolize our state of ignorance, he instead proves our need for knowledge because this confusion frustrates us as we want to understand. Moreover, the present-day sections are written in the style of the mystery genre, but the mystery is not solved; this does not allow us to accept our state of ignorance, as Ackroyd may have intended, but leaves us unsatisfied and frustrated. Ted Gioia says of Ackroyd " in his mimicry of the mystery genre,

he has created certain expectations that cannot be adequately resolved with just a sensitivity to ambiance and a piling up of coincidences...needs more than atmospheric to leave us satisfied at the tale's end." Thus, the effect of Hawksmoor on the audience, with regards to human knowledge, is to prove that it is a necessity.

In Arcadia, we have more knowledge than the characters concerning the plot, but it can be argued that the allusions and technicality are bewildering for us. We are aware that Bernard's theory about Byron is wrong, we are aware that Thomasina died on her seventeenth birthday, and we are aware that the hermit in the garden is Septimus. However, topics such as chaos theory, iterated algorithms, Fermat's last theorem and the second law of thermodynamics are complex and unheard of by many - Stoppard's play has been criticized as being aimed at intellectuals and not appealing to a wider audience. On the other hand, some of the characters are as ignorant as we are of these theories and have to be instructed, thereby allowing us to be taught these theories as well. The fact that the audience are aggravated by their ignorance and puzzlement proves that the need for human knowledge is a deep-seated part of our nature.

The importance of human knowledge is also explored through the constant learning and teaching in both texts. Both texts begin with a teacher-student scene: in Arcadia, Septimus is instructing Thomasina, and in Hawksmoor, Dyer is instructing Walter. In Hawksmoor, Mirabilis imparts his satanic knowledge to Dyer, Wren instructs Dyer in architecture, and Walter informs him of the gossip in the office; moreover, the main characters (Dyer, Wren, and Hawksmoor) also seek knowledge through research. The transfer of <https://assignbuster.com/human-knowledge-in-hawksmoor-and-arcadia-a-comparison/>

knowledge is widespread, and it is no coincidence that all the characters have a frenzy to know – even as Ackroyd maintains that knowledge cannot help us, his characters still prove that human knowledge is a necessity as none of them, even Dyer, are willing to exist in a state of ignorance.

Arcadia's characters share this need to learn and the transfer of knowledge is also widespread in the play; in the present-day scenes, academic, scientific and mathematical knowledge is shared, while in the past, Thomasina presents her theory to Septimus, and the exchange of gossip-knowledge is also clear. Moreover, the characters' frustration when they don't understand proves their need to acquire knowledge. Valentine, for example, is "shaking and close to tears" when he cannot prove his theory that there is a pattern to the so-called randomness of nature; similarly, Hawksmoor is frustrated when he cannot find the serial killer. The continuous exchange of knowledge and learning-teaching relationships in both texts suggests that this is an immense part of our lives, and therefore a fundamental part of our nature. Furthermore, we sympathize with the characters' frustration because we understand it, again proving wanting to know being a part of our nature.

While Arcadia ends by proving intellect is just as important as emotion and that human knowledge is an essential part of our nature, Hawksmoor's ending attempts to prove to us that ignorance is our natural state and that we will never know as much as we think we do. Stoppard agrees that our knowledge is limited but argues that we must carry on learning; indirectly, Ackroyd too acknowledges, through his structure and characters, that human nature will never be content with ignorance.

Works Cited

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