

No Need to Panic: AI Will Never Make Literature and Composition Superfluous

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For book lovers, book towns offer not only shelves of literature, but a bit of magic as well. RAW-films/Shutterstock



By Walker Larson

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Commentary

In a [recent editorial](#) for *Plough*, Paul Christman reflected on the future of his profession—teaching literature and writing—in light of the development of large language modeling, or “AI.” As AI continues to advance by improving its ability to mimic human-generated writing, Christmas and others in language-related fields have asked some existential questions: Does teaching literature and writing have a future? [Is high-school English dead?](#) Are writers even needed anymore?

It’s my belief that the humanities, especially the study of English, won’t die. If English does, it won’t be because AI writing superseded human literary work. It’ll be due to our own confusion about what it means to read and write. Anyone who thinks that AI could genuinely replace human writers and teachers has fundamentally misunderstood literature and education.

Questions We Should Ask

Before we weep over the obsolescence of composition courses, before universities decide whether to scrap their English departments, and before writers and teachers enroll en-masse in computer programming courses, we should ask questions. What are the humanities for? Are they to deepen our knowledge of human psychology so we can be more effective business leaders? Do they teach us how to write clear summaries of scientific experiments? Do they aid us in workplace communication? Or are the humanities about something beyond these practical considerations?

If the humanities are about something more than just pragmatic communication or stringing words together, then AI’s rise may be irrelevant to the humanities entirely. Certainly, it poses no threat to them.

In his response to, “Why does literature and writing matter?” Christman boldly asserts that literature is the queen of the sciences. He references John Calvin, who said that knowledge came in two types: knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves. Christman

places literature into this latter category, which in turn, leads to the former category.

He goes on, “there’s something about literature, an art form that evokes consciousness while being composed of language, which for many (though not all) of us is the medium in which consciousness makes itself felt. ... One text can hold seemingly (though not actually) everything.”

Because great novels portray a narrative involving human consciousness, human life, the human soul, and the creation that surrounds it, they capture the cosmos. Echoes of eternity spring from the page when we encounter the truths of human existence.

Christman laments how in contemporary literary parlance, ideas like truth, beauty, and goodness are mocked and rejected. Scholars consider these literary themes naive and childish. As a result, they find it difficult to make sense of the great books that use such themes. A book thrills readers because it puts them in touch with something real and true. On some level, even the literary critics know this.

As Christman writes, “Once you’ve broadly bought into this [anti-truth] worldview, the only remaining justification for studying old art is to help you understand the various discourses that have brought us to our current historical moment so that we can then change our political direction ... for some reason, we have allowed this language to become the dominant disciplinary currency.”

If the humanities die, it will be because truth, beauty, and goodness in the study of literature was dismissed and replaced with “rigorous” scientific and political terminology. Having abandoned the core concepts of the transcendentalists, it’s no wonder we’re left scratching our heads about the humanities, wondering what they’re for and whether they can compete with AI.

The Human Spirit

Literature professor John Senior **once said** “the purpose of [the] humanities is not knowledge but to humanize.” Only once we understand this do the difficulties about AI melt away like snow under a summer sun. No amount of AI development can replace the study of literature because literature is about human life and the mystery of existence. As such, it’s beneficial to students of any time and place, not to mention meaningless to an AI. We need literature and writing to form and sustain the human spirit itself.

AI might become skilled at simulating the writing process. It may be serviceable for certain writing tasks, but it can never create great works of literature nor comment on them in a meaningful way nor derive benefit from their study. Why? That requires a heart and a soul. Moreover, the study of writing forms the mind and teaches one to think. This is a skill humans need to develop, one we can’t relegate to machines. It’s one of the primary purposes of education.

Only when education is demoted to mere career-training can we possibly think AI will render education, especially literary instruction superfluous. The humanities must be studied and appreciated apart from any practical purpose, despite their practical benefits. Reading and writing—like the art of being human, to which they are tied—come before all utilitarian considerations. To look for a defense of the humanities, to seek to justify them using the same type of criteria by which we might justify a new company product or a new governmental department is an absurdity.

The humanities need no defense. Literature possesses inherent value, much the way that life does. If we’re going to ask whether AI will replace the need for humans to read and write, we might just as well ask whether AI will replace the need for humans to live, which is absurd. A machine can never do what a human is meant to do: know and love.

The only reason we are having this conversation is because certain leaders in government, tech, and education never read enough poetry. Lacking a foundation in the humanities, they entertain dehumanizing ideas like the notion that a machine could ever replace a human being’s spiritual activity. The humanities demonstrate the reality of

the human soul. Only someone ignorant of the humanities could see no difference between the lifeless, soulless grinding of a machine, and a living, breathing, human being who can open his eyes in wonder.

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