“What have they done to you now, Tally?”: Post-Posthuman Heroine vs. Transhumanist Scientist in the Young Adult Science Fiction Series Uglies

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FROM THE COVER OF UGLIES BY SCOTT WESTERFIELD
“What have they done to you now, Tally?”
Post-Posthuman Heroine vs. Transhumanist Scientist in the Young Adult Science Fiction Series Uglies

Petros Panaou

This article explores issues of importance to contemporary and future youths, scientists, and societies, as they are expressed in the first three books of the Uglies series, by Scott Westerfeld. A critical approach to transhumanist thought informs an analysis of the conflict between Dr. Cable, a transhumanist scientist, and Tally, the adolescent protagonist. Both the story and this article deal with a question that is central in identity formation: “What does it mean to be human?” Tally’s story is interpreted through a close reading that follows her posthuman transformations and traces tensions between young/old, human/inhuman, real/manufactured, knowingness/ignorance, and emotion/reason. Knowledge and science, as well as emotion and nature, play a central role in resolving the multiple issues that stem from questions about the human condition. A significant feature of Westerfeld’s narrative is that, through “informed resistance,” the protagonist manages to become a humane posthuman, keeping her superpowers while also regaining her identity and becoming able to feel and empathize again. In this sense, Tally Youngblood is a post-posthuman.
Scott Westerfeld’s young adult series Uglies (2005-2007) features four books (Uglies, Pretties, Specials, and Extras), is being read by millions of readers around the world, and has spent more than fifty weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. It has been translated into twenty-seven languages (“Scott Westerfeld”). Uglies has also been selected and incorporated in primary and secondary school curricula for the purposes of the European project Science Fiction in Education (“SciFiEd”). Westerfeld’s narrative features strong female characters who deal with issues of importance to contemporary and future youths, scientists, and societies. Elaine Ostry emphasizes adolescents’ need to explore posthuman questions:

The implications of the posthuman age baffle and frighten adults; how are they to be understood by young adults and children? If adolescence is the time when one considers what it means to be human, to be an individual, then there has never been a period of history when it has been more difficult to figure this out than now. Being introduced to and understanding the posthuman age is essential for young adults, as it is their future. (222)
As a science fiction narrative, the Uglies series projects current societal values and scientific breakthroughs into the future; in this manner, it encourages us to reflect on both present and future human and posthuman issues.

**Cable vs. blood**

Westerfeld’s series imagines a world in which compulsory surgery at sixteen makes everyone pretty, based on an ideal standard of beauty, bestowing equal evolutionary advantages to all. While this practice is supposed to eradicate discrimination, we soon discover that this is a highly segregated world. Those younger than sixteen are called Uglies and can only enviously observe the New Pretties from a distance. New Pretties live in luxury and have no obligation other than playing and partying. Tally Youngblood is almost sixteen and cannot wait to become Pretty. But when her friend Shay runs away to a rebel settlement called The Smoke, Tally has an alarming encounter with the menacing Department of Special Circumstances; a department ran by the ruthless scientist Dr. Cable:

“I’m Dr. Cable.”
“Tally Youngblood.”
Dr. Cable smiled. “Oh, I know who you are.”
The woman was a cruel pretty. Her nose was aquiline, her teeth sharp, her eyes a nonreflective gray. Her voice had the same slow, neutral cadence as a bedtime book. But it hardly made Tally sleepy. An edge was hidden in the voice, like a piece of metal slowly marking glass.
“You have a problem, Tally.”

“OK, Dr. Cable.” She cleared her throat and managed to say more, in a dry voice. “My problem right now is that I don’t know what’s going on. So... why don’t you tell me?”
“What do you think’s going on, Tally?”
Tally closed her eyes, taking a rest from the sharp angles of the woman’s face. (Westerfeld, *Uglies*, ch. “Special Circumstances”)

Their clash is all about knowing, and knowing is power. A knowledge-seeking
game quickly unfolds, during which Tally tries to find out “what's going on,” and Dr. Cable tries to find out what Tally knows about Shay’s escape and The Smoke. Since the adult scientist knows more than Tally at this stage of the story, she is able to take advantage of the teenager’s desire to become beautiful and her ignorance about the downsides of being transformed into a New Pretty. She threatens Tally that unless she becomes her spy and lead her to Shay and The Smoke, she will stay Ugly forever.

As the story develops, whenever Tally wins against Dr. Cable, it is because she manages to tip the knowledge scale; it is because she has an important breakthrough or knows something that Dr. Cable does not.

As a consequence of the initial knowledge imbalance, Tally seems to lose most of the important battles in the first book of the series. When she finds Shay and The Smoke, she falls in love with David—a boy who was born and raised there, away from the city’s artificial environment. She also discovers that Pretty surgery renders people conformist and obedient. Tally decides to stay ugly and not betray her friends to Dr. Cable, but her ignorance about tracking technology helps the Department of Special Circumstances to discover and destroy The Smoke. In an effort to redeem herself, at the end of the first book, she tricks Dr. Cable into believing that she still wants to become Pretty. The truth is that she wants to turn Pretty only so that David and his mother (the noble scientist in the story) can test on her a cure against Pretty surgery; in a way, she is donating her body to Science. Tally’s decision to become Pretty is not inspired by the body-enhancing ideology that dominates both her world and many contemporary societies. Her decision has to do with emotion (guilt about The Smoke’s obliteration) and knowledge (discovering a cure to “prettiness”).

**Dr. Cable the transhumanist**

When asked about his inspiration to write a story about a futuristic society where everyone is obliged to turn “Pretty” on their sixteenth birthday, Scott Westerfeld replies: “We are definitely heading toward a world in which lots of people will get to decide how they look. That will change what we think of as beautiful, and what beauty means to us” (Westerfeld). As we progress through all four of the books in the series, this concept gradually grows into a considerably wider one; namely, how we envision an ideal human being, and what humanness means to us. Uglies, Pretties, Specials and Extras are different ways of being human; in fact, each constitutes a different human species.

In the same interview, Westerfeld also asserts: “All through human history we have ornamented ourselves with clothes, jewelry, tattoos, brands, scars, suntans, makeup, etc. Modern plastic surgery is no more or less crazy than sticking a bone through your cheek. What’s different now is an explosion of new technology, which always makes things interesting (Westerfeld). Michael M. Crow makes a similar argument, but takes it to the next level; it is not just about changing the way we look, but about changing the way we are. In his preface to the book *Building Better Humans? Refocusing the Debate on Transhumanism*, he postulates that humans have always been highly adaptive and evolving creatures, driven to adapt and survive on a planet of powerful natural dynamics and forces. The difference about our current state is that we have now reached the point in human history where
we are a species directing and guiding our own physical, social, cultural, and planetary evolution (16). Crow explains that, as a highly adaptive species, we have gone through three distinct evolutionary phases: “Natural Evolution,” during which we used primitive tools to adapt to our environment; “Adaptive Evolution,” during which we moved to intensive development and use of tools to enhance our well-being; and “Self-directed Evolution,” during which we have achieved the capacity to shape our very organisms through self-enhancement (13-14). Crow concludes:

It is very difficult even to characterize the scale of the impact of science on human society during the past seven decades. As we negotiate the transition from an adaptive to a self-directed evolutionary species, we are engaged in scientific activities and technological advances that can alter who we are, how we act, how we adapt, and thus how we continue to evolve. (16)

This is why, he argues, we now need to ask three important questions: what are we doing, why are we doing it, and is this the outcome we want?

These are the same questions that Tally’s story, and other posthuman narratives, encourage us to consider. Tally and her society question what the generations before them did:

“What do you think?” she asked [David].
“Well, you know all about how the Rusties lived, right?” he said. “War and crime and all that?”
“Of course. They were crazy. They almost destroyed the world.”
“And that convinced people to pull the cities back from the wild, to leave nature alone,” David recited. “And now everybody is happy, because everyone looks the same: They’re all pretty. No more Rusties, no more war. Right?” (Westerfeld, Uglies, ch. “Pretty Minds”)

We are the “Rusties;” we are Tally and David’s stupid ancestors: “You almost couldn’t believe people lived like this, burning trees to clear land, burning oil for heat and power, setting the atmosphere on fire with their weapons” (Westerfeld, Uglies, ch. “The Rusty Ruins”). But most importantly, Tally and her friends also question what their current society is doing:

[David] smiled grimly. “Maybe it’s not so complicated. Maybe the reason war and all that other stuff went away is that there are no more controversies, no disagreements, no people demanding change. Just masses of smiling pretties, and a few people left to run things.”
Tally remembered crossing the river to New Pretty Town, watching them have their endless fun […] “Becoming pretty doesn’t just change the way you look,” she said.

Transhumanists, on the other hand, do not ask many questions as they seem to have definitive answers about our posthuman future. And While I will shortly argue that Dr. Cable is a transhumanist, let me first
summarize the premises of transhumanist thought. As early as 1927, the evolutionary theorist Julian Huxley defined Transhumanism as “the belief that the human species can and should transcend itself ‘by realizing new possibilities’ of and for human nature” (qtd. in Hauskeller 3). A growing number of natural scientists and philosophers currently share this belief. The journalist and writer Joel Garreau describes Transhumanism as a movement devoted to “the enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span” (Garreau qtd. in Wolfe xiii). Garreau continues, “What this network has in common is a belief in the engineered evolution of ‘post-humans,’ defined as beings ‘whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to no longer be unambiguously human by our current standards.’” According to this line of thinking, “transhuman” are those who are in the process of becoming “posthuman” (Garreau qtd. in Wolfe xiii).

Michael Hauskeller explains that, “Transhumanists want to do something against the ‘terrible fact of death,’ and they advocate social, mental, and physical improvement not only of individuals but of the whole species, which, they claim, will also make us happier and less prone to suffering” (Hauskeller 3). And while he does find value in dreaming of a better future, he disagrees with transhumanists’ radical and unchecked optimism:

The problem with the transhumanist dream is that its realization requires a radical transformation of the human condition, and radical transformations, and even all attempts at radical transformation, are typically fraught with dangers and uncertainties. [...] Yet by dwelling on the glorious future that allegedly awaits us, transhumanists make the risks of such an enterprise appear negligible, or at least acceptable. (Hauskeller 10)

Dr. Cable is a transhumanist; she believes in the self-evolution of humans into something more than human. In fact, not only does she believe in it, she also puts it into practice by creating an entire army of posthumans (including herself) who are called Specials. She disregards all risks and side effects in the process of doing it, even going as far as to declare war in order to protect her transhumanist project. Dr. Cable’s enhanced humans are taller, stronger, faster, and have sharper mental, sensory, and reflex skills than any average human would ever have; “average” is what they call all other humans, whom they view in disgust. In this sense, Dr. Cable is a “special” kind of transhumanist. While the transhumanist vision is to improve the entire species, Dr. Cable’s vision is to create different levels of posthumans, using the top-level ones to control those at the lower levels. Pretty may be blessed with beauty, health, and longevity, but they are not nearly as evolved as Specials; and Pretty surgery creates lesions on the brain that degrade the intellect and reinforce conformity and compliance. Scholars who criticize Transhumanism view the segregation of the human species into biologically superior and inferior humans as one of its most fearful possible implications. Dr. Cable, however, truly believes that in this manner she is protecting the world from yet another global
catastrophe, like the one the Rusties (our society) had brought upon the planet a few centuries ago. This historical precedent leads her to the conclusion that “freedom has a way of destroying things.” Specials, under her lead at the Department of Special Circumstances, are charged with the mission of protecting the world from humanity.

**Tally the posthuman**

In the third book, Tally is unwillingly turned into the newest version of Special; she acquires extraordinary superpowers but loses a large part of her memories, emotions, identity and humanness. She becomes one of Dr. Cable’s most special of Specials. Throughout the first three books, Tally’s body and mind go through radical transformations, evolving from Ugly to Pretty to Special and beyond. The young protagonist is gradually transformed into a superhuman, someone who is even more posthuman than Dr. Cable and her original Specials:

> Just as Dr. Cable had promised so long ago, this was better than bubbly. All of Tally’s senses were on fire, but her mind seemed to stand apart from them, observing their sensations without being overwhelmed. She was non-random, above average... almost beyond human. And she had been made to save the world. (Westerfeld, *Specials*, ch. “Rescue”)

Although Tally is forced into this transformation, she is initially amazed by the new powers she has been given. Even in the mist of this excitement, however, a sense of inhuman detachment is hinted at (her mind standing apart from her senses). The following scene highlights both her superhuman powers and her inhuman state in the eyes of David, her ex-boyfriend:

> [S]omehow Tally felt the moment of attack. An instant later, her peripheral vision caught the arrows on their way: one from each side, like two fingers crushing a bug. Her mind slowed time to a half-dead crawl. Less than a second from hitting, the missiles were too close for gravity to pull her down, no matter how fast she bent her knees. But Tally didn’t need gravity.... Her hands shot up from her sides, elbows bending, fingers curling into fists around the arrow shafts. They slid a few centimeters through her palms, the friction burning like snuffing a candle, but their momentum choked in her grip[...] Her eyes were still locked on David, and even through the sneak suit she saw his jaw drop open, a small, amazed sound carrying across the water. She let out a sharp laugh. His voice was shaking. “What have they done to you now, Tally?” (Westerfeld, *Specials*, ch. “Rescue”)

Unlike David, Tally seems to be oblivious to the inhumaness of her new state; later in the story, however, she does realize that what Dr. Cable has done to her makes her less human, as she is not able to love, empathize, or cry: “Tally felt tears burning inside, but the heat didn’t get into her eyes. She’d never seen a Special cry, and didn’t even know if she could” ch. “The Cut”).

In her comprehensive account of posthuman young adult SF, Elaine Ostry convincingly argues that the appeal of these
books to adolescents rests on the fact that they ask this central question: “What does it mean to be human?” Being a question that is itself a step in personal development, it is one that children do not ask but teenagers do (Ostry 236). The way one answers this question, can drastically influence one’s value system, character formation, and life choices. Ostry observes that the stories she examines tend to offer traditional, humanistic answers:

The traditional view of humanity is that it is based on a sense of empathy, morality, free will, and dignity. It is a fixed view, and this fixedness jars somewhat with the flexibility, or instability, of the human body and mind in these posthuman young adult science fiction texts. To say that someone is inhuman usually means that he or she is cruel, lacking the moral base on which human beings pride themselves. It also implies that the person is unemotional, unable to connect with others, lacking a heart. The ability to empathize is generally considered fundamental to a moral base. The books tend to emphasize the importance of emotion as part of what makes one human. (236)

The first three books in the Uglies series also seem to emphasize emotion and free will as part of what makes us human. In fact, it is through trying to feel and think on her own, as well as being close to nature and her loved ones, that Tally manages to “rewire” herself out of being Pretty and out of being Special. Towards the end of the third book, tears in her eyes come as confirmation of Tally’s self-transformation: “She tasted salt again, and finally felt the heat streaming down her cheeks. Tally reached her hands up, not quite believing until she saw her own fingertips glistening in the starlight. Specials didn’t cry, but her tears had finally come” (Westerfeld, Specials, ch. “Tears”).

**Tally Youngblood, the post-posthuman**

Tally eventually manages to become a humane posthuman, keeping her superpowers while also regaining her identity and becoming able to feel and empathize. In this sense, she is a post-posthuman. All of her efforts that brought about this achievement can be described as “informed resistance”: learning more about herself and her environment, and using this knowledge to resist oppression and acquire agency. She may have rewired herself through free will and emotion, but it is through knowledge and science that she eventually defeats Dr. Cable; after all, as mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, the epicenter of their conflict has always been knowledge.

At the end of the third book, Tally implements a well-thought-out plan to trick her nemesis and administer the anti-Special cure to Dr. Cable herself. By stopping Dr. Cable from being Special, Tally initiates a chain-reaction that loosens Special Circumstances’ control over the city and brings the entire establishment to its knees:

And finally she began to see that the cure was working...slowly. Gradually Dr. Cable seemed to become less sure of herself, less able to make decisions. “They’re telling everyone my secrets!” she started mumbling one day, running her fingers through her hair. (Westerfeld, Specials, ch. “Crumbling”)
But even though she stops being posthuman, Dr. Cable remains an unrepentant transhumanist. When the city dismantles Special Circumstances and cures all Specials, it is Dr. Cable who helps Tally escape, saving her from yet another surgical operation:

She swallowed. “But didn’t I, you know, destroy your world?” Dr. Cable stared at her for a long time with her unfocused, watery eyes. “Yes, but you are the last one Tally, [...] The last of my Specials designed to live in the wild, to exist outside the cities. You can escape this, can disappear forever. I don’t want my work to become extinct, Tally. Please...” (Westerfeld, Specials, ch. “Tears”)

And because of Dr. Cable’s transhumanism, Tally is the last posthuman creature by the end of book three. The fact that Tally wants to remain posthuman is attributed to her unwillingness to allow yet another violation of her body, but it is also implied that she does not want to let go of her special powers. She joins David in the wild, and warns the cities that if the new, cured societies start making the same mistakes and destroying nature like the Rusties did, they will find her in their way. And that is what she does in the fourth book, Extras. Although Extras is a fascinating story, it is not included in this discussion because Tally only has a secondary role and Dr. Cable does not appear at all.

Questions
My comparison of Dr. Cable’s and Tally’s worldviews through the lens of transhumanist thought has demonstrated how the first three books in the Uglies series deal with an important question that Ostry locates at the center of adolescent identity-formation processes: “What does it mean to be human?” A close reading of Tally’s story leads to the conclusion that, as well as emotion and nature, knowledge and science also play a positive role in resolving the multiple issues that stem from this question.

Ironically, the productive, enlightening, and empowering aspects of science are not often highlighted by young adult science fiction. In fact, most scholars of the genre agree that too often science fiction for youth is characterized by anti-scientism and technophobia (Nodelman; Applebaum; Mendlesohn). Farah Mendlesohn describes SF for the young as “socially conservative” because it frequently “advocates some kind of return to a world just like ours. Where we are now is the best we can ever be” (151). In contrast, Tally Youngblood devotes her posthuman life to preventing her contemporaries from returning to a world like ours, to the world where Rusties used to live. Moreover, Noga Applebaum observes that the majority of SF texts authored for young people “create a dichotomy between nature and technology, presenting the two as mutually exclusive” (30). While the Uglies books do feature anti-scientist and technophobic elements—personified in the conflict between Tally and Dr. Cable—the nature-vs-technology dichotomy is blurred by Tally’s use of knowledge, science, and technology to acquire agency and achieve her goals, her eventual post-posthuman-ness, and her commitment to use her posthuman powers to protect the natural environment.

The author of this article, similarly to the author of the series Uglies, does not as-
pire to provide definitive answers to questions about the ideal human condition. The main objective of this close reading is rather to demonstrate how Scott Westerfeld’s story, and perhaps other posthuman narratives, can engage us in useful discussions about what it means to be human, the coming of the posthuman age, and the roles of science and technology in it. Such stories and discussions can enable both adolescents and adults to make informed choices, in the present and in the future:

Q: Did you write this book as a cautionary tale?
A: Uglies isn’t about dire warnings, it’s about thinking things through. The more we think about this stuff, the better our choices will be.
(Westerfeld)

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THE UGLIES SERIES

WORKS CITED