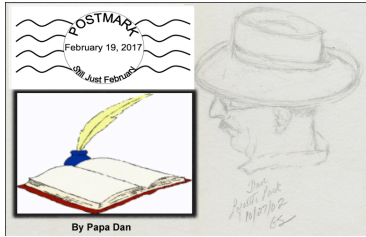# Did A Human Write This?
and
→ How Can You Tell? ←
By Dan Sapone

**Last Fall,
New York Times Columnist Farhad Manjoo
wrote a piece called:
"Did a Human Write This?"
Well? …**

===

In the Fall of 2020, a columnist named Farhad Manjoo reported in The New York Times something that many of us have come to realize — that machines have been gaining in their ability to *write* for a long time now; and, he says, "they are getting terrifyingly good at it." Many people and businesses have greeted this news with appreciation, for it can enhance our ability to do our work in many useful ways. So, why does Mr. Manjoo use the phrase "terrifyingly good" to describe this phenomenon? … (*pause here a moment for internal reflection*) … In another sentence, he nudges a bit closer to our real, human, concern — "I've never really worried that a computer might take my job because it's never seemed remotely possible." However, he goes on to introduce us to a relatively new piece of software, a "language model" called GPT-3 that seems to contradict this reassuring sentence. Apparently, you can "program" this software language model by providing a writing sample. It claims to be able to match the pattern and *"learn to write"* in the same style as a human writer would.

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmm …

So, the subject of Mr. Manjoo's piece, "Did A Human Write This?", is intriguing in itself; BUT here, in THIS piece of writing, I am asking a question that intrigues me much more:

→ "How Can You Tell?" ←

In other words, if we claim that we can tell that a human and not a computer wrote something, what is it about the writing that would enable us to make that distinction?
Let's explore this question.

Human Attributes: "The Usual"
Over centuries, humans have identified a set of attributes that we claim for ourselves as distinctly human. Some of these capabilities are fundamentally cognitive, like these two:
• the ability to recognize and remember a set of sequential stimuli and complex patterns
• a high-level ability to generate and comprehend complex language.

Computer programmers and software developers attest that computers can certainly do these two things in ways that sufficiently imitate human performance. Even if that's true, I don't think these are the determining factors in recognizing a human source for a piece of writing.

There are other recognized human attributes that are much more closely associated with what we think of as our "humanity," like these two examples:
• empathy — the ability to understand and share the feelings of others
• the ability to recognize and apply patterns of moral and ethical decision-making.

So, I ask: can these two examples of "humanistic" attributes be simulated or credibly imitated — heck, **independently performed** — by computer systems in ways that we would recognize? Can the resulting writings sound human? The makers of modern "language models" claim that they can. You and I might claim that we can tell whether attempts are genuinely human or computer-generated imitations. BUT, that would just lead to an argument between us and software engineers; and we might not win that argument. Once again, I don't whether those are the determining factors either. So, let's set that aside for a moment. So, let's go back to Mr. Manjoo's question in the New York Times: if computers could possess those abilities, does that mean that computers can take jobs being done today by our human writers? Can computers make human writers obsolete? I'll give you my answer.

My Answer: I'm saying "No"

There are formulations I have seen in the work of human writers over centuries (and in my own writing) that demonstrate distinctly human patterns of thought. I insist that these patterns are evidence of our **human-ness** that we can all recognize in our own behavior, and in the behavior of others, as distinctly human. They are NOT, I insist, patterns that computers would generate on their own. Even if they could, after looking at some examples, one can't help but ask, "Why would a computer want to intentionally imitate these human patterns of thought and expression? (It's not an unreasonable question to ask why humans would want to exhibit these patterns, but we can leave that for another time.) What are they? Let's examine three examples of traits that human writers have attributed to their human characters, both in fiction and nonfiction:

• The propensity for lapses in memory, and patterns of incongruity

• The potential of individuals to hold opposing and contradictory views simultaneously

• The habit of some individuals to act in ways that are contrary to their own best interests.

Well, now maybe we're getting closer to answering our question. These are human behaviors that appear repeatedly in writing about human characters. I am not convinced that writing generated entirely by computer software would or could feature these behaviors unless guided by an interfering human. On further reflection, even if they could, I don't think these are the most important features that could answer the question: can computers make human writers obsolete?

Below are what I claim are the three principal indictors that matter: human attributes that writers portray in their characters that exhibit the most common elements of our humanity. Without these examples (and I'm sure there are others), much of our literature would be deficient:

• Digression, also known as 'stream of consciousness' thinking

• Silliness

• Illogic

Perhaps there are other examples, but let's look at these three.

The Three Human Indicators: What do we see in Human Storytelling?

ONE: Digression: A lot of great American literature is built, at least in part, by this feature.

> "… but as I was saying when … "   or   "let's set that aside for a moment"

Literature is full of examples of "stream of consciousness" storytelling in which the "voice" of the story speaks to the reader directly and digresses from the telling to share seemingly random thoughts along the way — Jack London ("To Build a Fire"), Ambrose Bierce ("Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"), Edgar Allen Poe ("The Tell-Tale Heart"), Mark Twain ("Speech On The Weather" and many others), Kate Chopin ("The Night Came Slowly"), are impressive examples.

It is interesting to me that some of the best examples of digression are not just found in stories, but also poems. In one of my favorite pieces of distinctly human literature, Robert Frost uses digression to capture an important element of imaginative reminiscence. In his poem "Birches," Frost imagines a boy bending the branches of his father's birch trees. He retells an entire childhood scenario of the boy climbing the trees in a particularly stylish way while doing his chores — "as he went out and in to fetch the cows." A boy's entire world view is shaped by this imaginary process. BUT then we discover that it's all a digression. We hear that the speaker in the poem IS this boy, and then, as the poem brings us back to reality, it turns out that the ice storm is what bends the branches into their particular shape; but he would rather imagine something else:

> But I was going to say when Truth broke in
> With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm
> I should prefer to have some boy bend them
> As he went out and in to fetch the cows—

For Robert Frost, in his own recollection … or maybe in his imagination … he IS that boy —

> So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
> And so I dream of going back to be.
> It's when I'm weary of considerations,

He goes on to describe what it means to be "weary of considerations." His imagination allows him to escape "considerations," "rise *toward* heaven," but return to earth because:

> Earth's the right place for love:
> I don't know where it's likely to go better.

So, reality wins out over imagination … but … he concedes that the life of his imagination is not a bad place to visit:

> One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

But … I digress (you knew that was coming, eh?) To return to Mr. Manjoo's question — No, a computer could not have used such a digression from reality to imagination and then back again to reality to convey important messages about being human. Only a human could do that.

Below is the full text of Frost's poem (you were hoping for that, eh?) It's chock full of examples that confirm that no computer program imaginable could tell a story that takes you inside the human mind and heart the way these words do.

Birches   By Robert Frost

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
As ice-storms do. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.   [10:00]

TWO: Silliness. Illustrating another distinctly human attribute — here is a childhood ditty that got translated into something that endured for more than a century:

>   Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy
>   A kidd'l eat ivy too, wouldn't you?

That ended up being translated by generations of kids into this human silliness:

>   Marsey-dotes and dosey-dotes, and little lambsey-divey
>   A kidd'ldey-divey-doo, wouldn't you?

Literature throughout western civilization is full of enduring uses of silliness to demonstrate a host of human values and truths. Monty Python is a modern example. We can go back a bit farther to Don Quixote by Cervantes and some of the writings of Roald Dahl with his "vocabulary of made-up words." Even the ancient Greeks made use of silliness to make people giggle many centuries ago. For more — take a look into a book by art critic Peter Timms [Silliness, A Serious History](#), which looked at the ways we've been made to laugh in pursuit of serious literary themes through our literary history.

These examples affirm the assertion that a computer is not capable of using our innate human silliness to write something that is purely fun and ridiculous without resorting to some bit of logical sense. Only humans are sufficiently silly to reveal that aspect of our human selves.

THREE: Illogic: Spock's breakthrough
The masterful writing of Gene Roddenberry in the TV series Star Trek, repeatedly illustrated the effect of combining human (i.e., Earthling) and nonhuman (i.e., Vulcan) attributes. In the episode "The Galileo Seven (co-written by Oliver Crawford)," Lt. Commander Spock illustrates, as always, the contrast between his Vulcan dependence on logic as the overriding guiding principle of all of his decisions and the more "human" decision-making typical of Captain Kirk, which sometimes utilized emotion and impulsive reliance on intuition.

In this story, Spock is commander of a landing spacecraft whose small crew launched from The USS Enterprise to land on a small planet and solve a life-threatening problem. When the expedition went awry and trapped Spock on the planet's surface, the crew risked the safety of their ship to save Spock's life. He had ordered them to take off without him to save the ship and crew (a logical order); but they disobeyed his order by applying their human compassion, risked their own lives, and went back to the planet to save him. Although he reprimanded them for their illogical decision, what followed was a decision he had to make to save them all from certain destruction.

For technical reasons, the Starship Enterprise was unable to locate the Galileo to beam them back to the ship. With fuel running out, the Galileo and all on board, appear to be doomed to fall and burn up in the planet's atmosphere. Spock's response was, for him, illogical — he launched and ignited the remaining fuel tank — ending their control of the ship — effectively sending up a flare. The slim hope was that the Enterprise, heading in a different direction, would see it and determine their location well enough to beam them aboard and save them all.

MCCOY: It may be the last action you'll ever take, Mr. Spock, but it was all human.
SPOCK: Totally illogical. There was no chance.
MCCOY: That's exactly what I mean.

At the last moment, as the ship begins to burn up, transporter beams lock onto the crew members and transport them safely onboard the Enterprise.

Back on duty, a bemused Captain Kirk questions Spock about his last-minute command decision:

KIRK: There's really something I don't understand about all of this. Maybe you can explain it to me. Logically, of course. When you jettisoned the fuel and ignited it, you knew there was virtually no chance of it being seen, yet you did it anyhow. That would seem to me to be an act of desperation.
SPOCK: Quite correct, Captain.
KIRK: Now we all know, and I'm sure the doctor will agree with me, that desperation is a highly emotional state of mind. How does your well-known logic explain that?
SPOCK: Quite simply, Captain. I examined the problem from all angles, and it was plainly hopeless. Logic informed me that under the circumstances, the only possible action would have to be one of desperation. Logical decision, logically arrived at.
KIRK: I see. You mean you reasoned that it was time for an emotional outburst.
SPOCK: Well, I wouldn't put it in exactly those terms, Captain, but those are essentially the facts.
KIRK: You're not going to admit that for the first time in your life, you committed a purely human emotional act?
SPOCK: No, sir.
KIRK: Mr. Spock, you're a stubborn man.
SPOCK: Yes, sir.

Illogic is such an intrinsic feature of human behavior and understanding that a human writer would be capable of expressing is convincingly. It is one of the clear qualities of human writing that cannot be successfully imitated by a computer. We humans recognize it when we see it. So, no, the jobs of human writers are not in danger of being overtaken by computers. End of discussion. So says the human writer.