

The following passage is excerpted from Susan Stewart's "Thoughts on the Role of the Humanities in Contemporary Life." (published in *New Literary History* 36.1 (Winter 2005): 97-103.)

First, write a summary of the following excerpt in your first paragraph and give MLA documentation format in its rightful place. Then, in the following paragraphs take this excerpt as your point of departure (when necessary, quotations should be made in the rightful MLA documentation format, too) and discuss whether you see a crisis in the humanities studies and describe your vision of literary studies (which includes your own role in it) in this context. You will be assessed in the following proportion: summary (25%); MLA format (5%); content (70%)

It is part of the very nature of the documents and objects studied by the humanities that they can alter our apprehension of time. They are the archives of all the generations before us, archives of folly as well as wisdom, and carry the full weight of our legacy from the past, which we otherwise bear partially and largely unconsciously. Memory and imagination, like forgiveness and promises, are ways of transcending our immersion in our lived relation to time, and our models for these possibilities lie in the works of literature, art, music, history, and philosophy that have been carried into the present. When the humanities emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as forms of literary culture, "polite" or "profane" learning, rooted in the study of the Latin and Greek language and literature, they embraced the repertoire of human self-making and self-knowledge. Think of emotions such as patience, greed, cleverness, jealousy, persistence, vision, grief, regret, curiosity, suffering, devotion, generosity—is it possible to know such qualities merely in the flow of experience without the forms literature and art provide for them? These emotions are called Penelope, Midas, Tom Thumb and Odysseus, Iago and Hera, Aeneas, Tiresias, Hecuba, Faust, Pandora, Job, Alcestis, Philemon and Baucis, and a thousand other names. Imagine the constraints upon our five senses without the use—we might say the prosthesis—made available to them in painting, sculpture, music, theater, dance, film, and literature, both oral and written. Consider the poverty of a world where past actions and events had never been organized or interpreted as historical narratives or philosophical examples. Made forms call for interpretation and, by their very incompleteness, call us to our place among our human kind. We know our humanity is unfinished on the level of our individual existence (102) and on the level of the destiny of our species: the finite intended works produced by the arts and humanities are the domain where we are free to express, explore, understand, and extend what our humanity might be.

We could conclude that the aim of the arts and humanities is to increase the

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openness of chance, and even error—and hence to produce the ironic and deliberative knowledge that ensues from the recognition of error. If all of our thought is end-oriented, there will be tremendous pressure to make results conform to expectations, and nothing could be more disastrous for the imagination and the production of insight. Mistakes may be costly within the finite terms of the economic system. But in the bigger picture—that of the success of human life as a product of human making—the banishment of mistakes would be far costlier, for it would mean the end of learning. Why is it not possible to reduce the endless production and consumption of excess, useless, wealth in goods and to increase the production and consumption of excess—in the richest sense, useless—knowledge? The malaise of a society with too much material wealth has been evident throughout history, but a society weakened by too much knowledge has yet to appear. A people who have no opportunities for creativity are bound to seek out sensational and ultimately violent forms of excitation in order to know they are alive: those who have no opportunity for thought and action are ripe for political manipulation and tyranny.

Everywhere they turn, the sciences and religion encounter, and seek an escape from, death. Yet what is the point of a prolonged life if it results in becoming an artifact of a technology we have forgotten that we have invented? And why seek an end to the tasks of thought, when the true task is to find some common means to disseminate and perpetuate it in the pursuit of those forms of significance that are uniquely our own? (103)