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Summer August, 2010

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After the Fall

Visions of Women in Post-Apocalyptic Novels

by Women Authors

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The 12th International Conference of ISSEI
Çankaya University, Ankara, Turkey 2010

Stories about the apocalypse, or the end of the world as we know it, are as old as mythology. In most, if not all, world stories, there are visions of a great catastrophe marking the end of the world, sometimes permanent, sometimes marking a rebirth. The causes of this apocalypse were generally those things ancient people experienced themselves: fire, flood, and war, as in the Norse story of Ragnarok.

However, detailing life after the apocalypse and the rebuilding of society is more recent. While the stories in world mythology frequently involve rebirth or renewal, they are not usually done from the viewpoint of the survivors dealing with the aftermath of the catastrophe. Despite the opportunity to do so in the Christian Old Testament, the biblical story of Noah and the flood doesn't really qualify as post-apocalyptic as we define it today, because there are no real struggles among the characters and no real descriptions of the horrors of the apocalypse. (In addition, the survivors view the flood as a positive force that rid the world of evil — though it was of course quick to return.) In fact, suffering of the characters in the post-apocalyptic landscape, views of the apocalypse as bad, and vivid descriptions of the apocalypse and its aftermath are generally taken as hallmarks of a post-apocalyptic work.

The earliest post-apocalyptic work is probably Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). As Muriel Spark put it, Shelley "created an entirely new genre [...] compounded of the domestic romance, the Gothic extravaganza, and the sociological novel."¹ The descriptions of the plague that swept the world and left the eponymous last man alone on a small boat in the Mediterranean were so shocking that the *Monthly Review* described the novel as "the product of a diseased imagination and a polluted taste, which described the ravages of the plague in such minute detail that the result was not a picture but a lecture in anatomy."²

The evolution of fictional apocalypses mirrors the advance of science and public awareness: the ancients viewed the apocalypse as the work of the gods, and floods and war were the main vehicles; in Shelley's time scientists knew the germ theory of disease, and that became a primary vehicle. In the 1950s the atomic bomb elevated the consequences of war to causing the end of all civilization, and nuclear war became the predominant vehicle for the apocalypse, as seen in works such as Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) and Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* (1959).

In the 1960s and '70s a growing awareness of environmental degradation caused by worldwide industrialization entered the mainstream consciousness beginning with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and culminating with the first Earth Day celebrations in 1970 and the passage of the Clean Air Act in the United States later that year. This coincided with a "new wave" of science fiction more concerned with the social sciences than with technology, and led to almost all of the post-apocalyptic novels by women authors.

Post-Apocalyptic novels range from bleak to hopeful. Shelley's *The Last Man* is a hopeless tale of a small band of survivors travelling through a ravaged Europe, slowly losing members of the party until only one is left, and he is truly the last man on earth. Sheri S. Tepper sets a more optimistic tone in *The Gate to Women's Country*, in which the apocalypse is a distant memory and the focus of the novel is on the creation of a new civilization.

Indeed, despair, hope, and a new civilization are often the very points of post-apocalyptic fiction. Authors destroy all of civilization, often rebuilding it again, for one of a few main purposes: to show us where dangerous trends in today's society might lead (cautionary tales); to explore human nature in extreme circumstances, stripped of the veneer of civilization; to see how society might be rebuilt by survivors stripped of their civilization; and to see how society might be rebuilt to avoid the dangers and injustices in our society today.

Shelley's *The Last Man* is perhaps an exception in this regard: as a *roman à clef* it is more a cathartic examination of Shelley herself following the deaths of her son William, her husband, Percy Shelley, and their friend Lord Byron, among others. Hugh Luke notes in the introduction to the 1965 edition that "paradoxically enough, Byron's death seems to have acted to dispel her deep melancholia and to help revive her creative powers."³ The apocalyptic plague is part Shelley's fascination with science (she is also author of *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*, the 1818 novel that Brian Aldiss called "the first great myth of the industrial age" and which many accept

as “the progenitor of modern science fiction⁴), part Shelley dealing with the loss of her “elite,” and part exploration of the theme of tragic isolation also found in *Frankenstein* and the poetry of Lord Byron, among others. The last man in the novel, Lionel Verney, is generally taken to be Shelley herself.⁵

However, both Shelley and P.D. James, in *The Children of Men*, also use the plague as an almost divine retribution for the arrogance and ambition of mankind. After quoting Hesiod (“The God sends down his angry plagues from high, / Famine and pestilence in heaps they die.”) Shelley writes, “That the plague was not what is commonly called contagious, like the scarlet fever, or extinct small-pox, was proved. It was called an epidemic. But the grand question was still unsettled of how this epidemic was generated and increased.”⁶ James’ society is struck not by plague but mass infertility. Where Shelley had the last man, James imagined the last child, born 25 years before the beginning of the novel. James writes “We are outraged and demoralized less by the impending end of our species, less even by our inability to prevent it, than by our failure to discover the cause.”⁷ After noting that science has become our new god, she writes, “The old gods reappeared, terrible in their power.”⁸

James’ novel is therefore less a cautionary tale than pure speculative fiction: what would happen if there were no more children? At the beginning of the book, the youngest person in the world is 25, and the world has sunk into depression. In Britain, the workings of a functional society are maintained by importing young foreign workers and then expelling them at age 60. Older, infirm citizens are becoming so numerous in comparison to the younger workers needed to care for them

that only the wealthy can live in nursing homes; the rest either die helpless in their homes or take part in mass suicides. To maintain order, Britain is ruled by a dictator called the Warden who mandates that every citizen learn skills that might help them survive if they happen to be among the last human beings and submit to a medical exam to see if they are still infertile. At the end, however, the novel is about power. A single pregnant woman, Julian, is part of a resistance group fighting the totalitarian government, and is chased across Britain by government troops wanting to use her pregnancy to maintain their grip on power. In the end, the child's father kills the Warden and takes his Coronation Ring, the symbol of authority worked with a ruby cross, and puts it on his finger to become the new leader. In the final scene, the other government leaders are introduced to the baby, and Theo christens him: "It was with a thumb wet with his own tears and stained with her blood that he made on the child's forehead the sign of the cross."⁹

The invocation of religion is hardly surprising in the face of global devastation, and James' use is related to power and preservation of the existing order. Shelley uses religion in a more despairing or existential manner, as when Varney asks himself, "Did God create man, merely in the end to become dead earth in the midst of healthful vegetating matter? Was he of no more account to his Maker, than a field of corn blighted in the ear?"¹⁰ In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Year of the Flood*, religion is used in different ways. *The Year of the Flood* takes place during the year of the apocalyptic plague, or "waterless flood," and largely follows the lives of a religious order called "God's Gardeners," whose members expect the catastrophe

and prepare for it. Their experiences before and after the plague immerse us in their strange but familiar world and tell us much of how their world's problems came to be:

She's counting on this garden: her supplies in the storeroom are getting low.

Over the years she'd stashed what she thought would be enough for an emergency like this, but she's underestimated. And now she's running out of soybits and soydines. Luckily, everything in the garden is doing well: the chickenpeas have begun to pod, the beananas are in flower, the polyberry bushes are covered with small brown nubbins [...] On the delicate carrot fronds she finds two bright-blue kudzu-moth caterpillars. Though developed as a biological control for invasive kudzu, they seem to prefer garden vegetables.¹¹

There are few human survivors. At the end, one of the religious leaders speaks "On the fragility of the universe":

Other religions have taught that this World is to be rolled up like a scroll and burnt to nothingness, and that a new Heaven and a new Earth will then appear. But why would God give us another Earth when we have mistreated this one so badly? No, my friends. It is not this Earth that is to be demolished: it is the Human Species. Perhaps God will create another, more compassionate race to take our place.¹²

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is speculative fiction¹³ and a cautionary tale about a government takeover by religious fundamentalists who oppress women completely, citing Biblical precedent. Their motives are the same as the Warden's in *The Children of Men*: though infertility is not universal, it is common enough that fertile women are forced to work as "Handmaids" to powerful men, who must do their "duty" with them by being fruitful and replenishing the earth. The narrator, Offred, is offered illicit sex by her gynecologist, who offers to impregnate her, telling her that most of the men with Handmaids are sterile. She thinks, "he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There's no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren."¹⁴ She admits that she wants to become pregnant, thinking, "It's true, and I don't ask why, because I know. Give me children, or else I die."¹⁵ An educated woman before the takeover, Offred knows that pollution was the cause: "The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation. The water swarmed with toxic molecules [that] creep into your body, [so] your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies."¹⁶ But after the takeover, men have power, women have babies or die. There is no other use for a Handmaid.

The themes of sterility and childbearing in concert with ecological balance are common in women's post-apocalyptic fiction, including Marge Piercy's *He, She, and It*: "the leftover radiation from power plant residues and the stockpiles of toxic chemicals long since part of the water table had left most people infertile without heroic measures to conceive."¹⁷ Procreative power is woman's, and many works from Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* detail the danger of men usurping

that power out of what psychologist Karen Horney termed “womb envy.” In *Oryx and Crake*, a brilliant but amoral bioengineer decides to create a better human race, but can only do so by engineering a plague to wipe out the existing one. And in Piercy’s *He, She, and It*, a male engineer attempts to illegally create an human looking android, with the narrative told in parallel with the story of a 17th century rabbi creating a golem to protect the Jews from Crusading Catholics. Both creations succeed, to a point, but raise serious ethical questions of free will and serve as a vehicle for the author to provide a partial answer to Freud’s question “What do women want?”: “In the myth of Pygmalion, we assume that she would love her sculptor, but Shaw knew better. Each of us wants to possess ourself; only fools willingly give themselves away.”¹⁸

Another example is in Kate Wilhelm’s *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, which imagines a slow-moving apocalypse of environmental degradation leading to mass sterility, widespread famine, and plague: “I saw Miami, and the people, all trying to get somewhere else, standing in line for days, standing on the trains. They’re evacuating Miami. People are falling dead, and they’re just leaving them where they fall.”¹⁹ Eventually everything was dead except for the survivors in the Valley: “no animals, nothing. Only burrowing insects had survived: ants ... termites ...”²⁰ The residents of the Valley are also sterile and the leaders — all men — resort to cloning to survive, but the clones are not like them. The new society is of five identical Barry brothers, five identical Molly sisters, etc., and the clones believe their society is superior to the animalistic humans who brought them into the world. Eventually fertility returns but the clones reject it. They are brilliant learners and workers, but

creativity begins to die out and they begin to be more like ants, which becomes a recurring theme: “Have you ever seen what happens to a strange ant when it falls into another ant colony?” one of the clones asks Mark, a naturally born human, who replies, “I’m not an ant.”²¹ Eventually Mark founds his own colony based on lower, more sustainable technology, which thrives, while the clone society collapses after a tornado destroys the mill that generates their electricity.

The most extreme use of procreative power among these works is in Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country*, in which men and women live largely apart, men in highly patriarchal military garrisons, women in matriarchal cities where they practice medicine, literature, weaving, farming, and other sciences, arts, and crafts. They raise the children until age five, when the boys move into the garrisons. The men revere Ulysses and Telemachus, whom they call “the ideal son.” Women study and annually enact the play “Iphigenia at Ilium,” and echoes of the Trojan War, prophecies of doom, and the fates of the Trojan women resonate throughout the book. The radical principle guiding the women’s society is explained by one of its leaders near the end of the book:

Three hundred years ago, almost everyone in the world had died in a great devastation brought about by men. [...] Only a few were left, Some of them were women, and among them was a woman who called herself Martha Evesdaughter. Martha taught that the destruction had come about because of men’s willingness — even eagerness — to fight, and she determined that this

eagerness to fight must be bred out of our race, even if it might take a thousand years.”²²

Indeed, she reveals, the women have been practicing selective breeding for centuries in an attempt to create a more peaceful human race.

Of all the troubling, haunting, and even radical tableaux in these books, one clearly stands out as inspirational: the God’s Gardeners group in Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*, a religious group as close to the Jains as to the Christians, vegetarian, egalitarian, ecological, tough-minded survivalists who invoke figures like Saint Rachel Carson and Saint Dian Fossey, ask forgiveness for the eradication of species, and pray for the earth:

We hold in our minds the Great Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico, and the Great Dead Zone in Lake Erie, and the Great Dead Zone in the Black Sea, and the desolate Grand Banks of Newfoundland, where the Cod once abounded, and the Great Barrier Reef, now dying and bleaching white and breaking apart. Let them come to Life again; let Love shine upon them and restore them, and [...] help us to accept in all humility our kinship with the Fishes, who appear to us mute and foolish; for in Your sight, we are all mute and foolish.²³

The ultimate purpose of speculative fiction is to inspire the reader to look at the world with new eyes, and with recent scandals regarding privatized security (Blackwater),

genetic engineering (Monsanto), oil spills and other toxins in the environment, global warming, the spread of formerly tropical diseases like West Nile virus worldwide, and the rise of religious fundamentalism, there is no shortage of news to make events in many of these books seem plausible. One can only hope that more and more groups like God's Gardeners rise up to counter some of these troubling trends, both ecological and religious.

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Themes

- Plague — *The Last Man, Oryx and Crake, The Year of the Flood, Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang, He, She, and It*
 Environmental Degradation — *He, She, and It, Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang, Oryx and Crake, The Year of the Flood, The Gate to Women's Country, The Handmaid's Tale*
 Global Warming — *He, She, and It, Oryx and Crake, The Year of the Flood*
 Nuclear War — *The Gate to Women's Country, He, She, and It*
 Sterility — *The Children of Men, He, She, and It, Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang, The Handmaid's Tale*
 Corporate Takeovers — *He, She, and It, Oryx and Crake, The Year of the Flood*
 Government/Religious Takeover — *The Handmaid's Tale, The Children of Men*
 Patriarchy — *The Handmaid's Tale, He, She, and It, The Gate to Women's Country, The Children of Men*
 Matriarchy — *He, She, and It, The Gate to Women's Country*
 Religion and Ethics — *The Handmaid's Tale, Oryx and Crake, The Year of the Flood, The Children of Men, He, She, and It, The Last Man, The Gate to Women's Country*
 High Technology — *Oryx and Crake, The Year of the Flood, He, She, and It, Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*
 Low Level Technology, Sustainability, Ecological Balance — *The Year of the Flood, He, She, and It, The Gate to Women's Country, Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*

Endnotes

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- ¹ Muriel Spark, in *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, (Tower Bridge Publications, Essex, England, 1951), p. 2.
- ² Elizabeth Nitchie, in *Mary Shelley: Author of "Frankenstein,"* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1953) p.151.
- ³ Hugh J. Luke, Jr., Introduction to *The Last Man* (University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. x.
- ⁴ H. Bruce Franklin, "Science Fiction: The Early History," Rutgers University web site, accessed July 2010 <<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~hbf/sfhist.html>>.
- ⁵ See, for instance, Walter E. Peck's "The Biographical Elements in the Novels of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley," in *PMLA*, XXXIII (1923).
- ⁶ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (University of Nebraska Press, 1965) p. 166-7.
- ⁷ P.D. James, *The Children of Men* (Warner Books, 1992), p. 6.
- ⁸ James, *Children of Men*, p. 11.
- ⁹ James, *Children of Men*, p. 351.
- ¹⁰ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 290.
- ¹¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* (Nan A. Talese, 2009), p. 16.
- ¹² Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 424.
- ¹³ Margaret Atwood, "Writing Oryx and Crake." in *Oryx and Crake* (Nan A. Talese, 2003), p. 382.
- ¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Ballantine Books, 1985), p. 79.
- ¹⁵ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*.
- ¹⁶ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 143.
- ¹⁷ Marge Piercy, *He, She, and It* (Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 116.

¹⁸ Piercy, *He, She, and It*, p. 418.

¹⁹ Kate Wilhelm, *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* (Pocket Books, 1976), p. 30.

²⁰ Wilhelm, *Sweet Birds*, p. 70.

²¹ Wilhelm, *Sweet Birds*, p. 151.

²² Sheri S. Tepper, *The Gate to Women's Country* (Foundation Books, 1988) p. 265-6.

²³ Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 196-7.