



IMAGINING THE POST-APOCALYPSE

The *Digital Literature Review*

The *Digital Literature Review* is a journal showcasing undergraduate student work in literature and cultural studies. The journal is produced by undergraduate students at Ball State University who are involved in the *Digital Literature Review* immersive learning project. Our goal is to provide a forum where undergraduate students can showcase their research projects and disseminate their valuable contributions to ongoing academic conversations.

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Life Upon A Swiftly Tilting Planet: An Introduction to the Literature of the Post-Apocalypse

by Leah Heim, *Co-Lead Editor*

So, the world's over. Now what?

That, of course, is the million-dollar question, and it is one that humanity has striven to answer since times immemorial, as demonstrated by the apocalyptic floods in both Genesis and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The Christianized West's fascination with the end of the world began as St. John penned his prophetic Book of Revelation and continued through medieval representations of the Black Death until our modern day, where much of our entertainment continues to capitalize on end-time mania. In much of modern literature and film, however, the end of the world has been removed from the Christian context of St. John and now leans toward more secular terrors: nuclear holocaust, climate change, robots, and, of course, zombies. However, the Christian term remains: *apocalypse*—the moment of uncovering, of revealing.

The term remains appropriate, for while many modern apocalypse stories have little to do with divine Christian revelation, each has a bounty to reveal about the nature of our culture, of our world, and of our humanity as a whole.

But wait. Isn't this edition of the *Digital Literature Review* about the *post-apocalypse*? Why harp upon the end itself, then, if it's the tale of the *after* that this journal analyzes? As it turns out, the study of the post-apocalypse is a study in temporality—or rather, the disruption thereof. James Berger, in his book *After the End* (1999), suggests that the ends that we imagine are not in fact ends at all: our apocalypses are our histories, terrors that humanity has already witnessed and lines that humanity has already crossed. If one holds to Berger's definition of apocalypse as an event that absolutely “breaks with the past, as catastrophes bearing some enormous or ultimate meaning,” then one comes to understand that humanity has already endured an indefinite amount of apocalypses within the past thousand years—truly, even within the past hundred (xii). Indeed, as Berger says, “the most dystopic vision of science fiction can do no more than replicate the actual historical catastrophes of the twentieth century”—Auschwitz, Rwanda, Hiroshima, and Chernobyl, to name only a tragic few (xiii). Reading post-apocalyptic literature then, as Berger claims, becomes a type of traumatized pattern of remembrance; our culture is obsessed with apocalypse because it, and each of us in it, is working through the trauma of these historical

apocalyptic events. Scholars such as Lee Quinby question whether this obsession is in fact healthy for a democratic society, but the horse here is already out of the barn: if the box office is any judge, representations of apocalypse are here to stay. We will find a way to cope with our historical terrors. And if, as Berger argues, these historical terrors are apocalypses, then we, at this very moment, live post-apocalyptically.

Admittedly, the stories that make headlines in our world today do not look so much like the five stages of post-apocalyptic plot defined by Gary K. Wolfe in his chapter “The Remaking of Zero:” “(1) the experience or discovery of cataclysm; (2) the journey through the wasteland created by the cataclysm; (3) settlement and establishment of a new community; (4) the re-emergence of the wilderness as antagonist; and (5) a final, decisive battle or struggle to determine which values shall prevail in the new world” (8). However, the images that often arise in our world are decidedly post-apocalyptic. Crowds of refugees walk through chaos and rubble that could be a set for any Hollywood blockbuster. We see images from mega-storms and hurricanes that come right out of *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), or perhaps out of *Genesis*. Entire neighborhoods in Detroit could be on-location sites for *The Walking Dead* (2010-present); in fact, one deindustrialized town in Georgia—Grantville—actually *was* a filming site for the series. Truly, it is a timely moment to read the literature of the post-apocalypse: our class this year watched with horror as Hurricanes Harvey and Maria ripped through Houston and Puerto Rico, as North Korea threatened atomic war, as the refugee crisis continued unabated in Syria and Bangladesh, and as an outbreak of senseless mass shootings swept through the country.

As a literature major, I have been told over and over again that my field of study is “not important” or “not real.” To people who have this attitude, I say that literature begins to feel very important and very real when the plot of the novel you’re reading appears in an NPR article.

In today’s climate, it may be difficult to study imagined apocalypses. We at the *Digital Literature Review* understand. However, I believe that our journal has a particular obligation to continue our work in the face of these terrors. To illustrate this fact, I refer to a book by one of my heroes—Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (1978).

Named after a line of a poem by Conrad Aiken, L’Engle’s book is the third in her Time Quintet series, the first installation of which is her famous children’s classic, *A Wrinkle in Time*. While written for a juvenile audience, L’Engle’s *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* discusses a topic that could make parents uneasy—nuclear war. The story follows fifteen-year-old Charles Wallace Murry as he journeys through time and space to stop an imminent

atomic threat by Mad Dog Branzillo, a dictator of a small country who has obtained missiles from a few “powerful friends” (L’Engle 9). Such a circumstance harkens back to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, which would have been within recent memory for many of the text’s first readers in 1978. And, admittedly, such a situation feels unnervingly reflective of today’s political environment as well.

While the entire book deserves examination, it is the first chapter that displays particular relevance to the mission of this year’s installment of the *Digital Literature Review*. The story begins on Thanksgiving Day in the Murry household, where the entire family has gathered together to celebrate. Meg Murry O’Keefe and the rest of the Murry family work to get their Thanksgiving meal on the table; as such, L’Engle creates a strong atmosphere of nostalgia and harmony for any reader with similar holiday memories. Suddenly, however, Dr. Murry—the family’s kind patriarch and a renowned scientist—receives a call from the President of the United States, who explains that Mad Dog Branzillo intends to start nuclear war and that the world has only twenty-four hours “in which to avert tragedy” (L’Engle 9).

What began as a pleasant day for the Murry family is shattered by the imminent death of humanity. However, the Murrays sit down at their Thanksgiving meal anyway, adhering to their usual holiday routine. When Meg, panicked, questions their devotion to such mundane habits in the face of an apocalypse, her father offers these wise words: “You know, my dears, the world has been abnormal for so long that we’ve forgotten what it’s like to live in a peaceful or reasonable climate. If there is to be any peace or reason, we have to create it in our own hearts and homes” (L’Engle 26).

Examining post-apocalyptic literature in today’s global situation might seem depressing at best and insensitive at worst, for we, like the Murrays, live in a world a button away from disaster. We understand that disregarding these issues will do nothing for the betterment of the situation, but there’s the rub. For when we devote ourselves to the study of our fatal reality, how can we move forward? How can we overcome incapacitating hopelessness when we grasp the immensity of our world’s problems? Like Meg Murry O’Keefe, we want to do something, but, also like Meg, we don’t know what to do. And it’s easy to become petrified as complacency and desperation collide, like hot air meeting cold—as fear rips through our world with a tornadic roar.

Sometimes it feels as if I have watched this storm since birth, and when I heard that the theme of this year’s *Digital Literature Review* was post-apocalypse, I seriously contemplated whether or not I had the emotional stamina to subject myself to conversations about dying worlds. But, happy coincidence, I revisited Madeleine L’Engle’s childhood gem,

and this scene at the Murrys' Thanksgiving table made my decision for me. For in the end, the Murry family doesn't recede into complacency and ignore their desperate situation, but they don't spend the day panicking either; they sit down at a table and talk. And this is what the *Digital Literature Review* does; we talk. We are not complacent, and we are not hopeless, because we can still talk. And language is a powerful thing indeed.

So, what's the conversation around the table in this year's edition of the *Digital Literature Review*? Brandon Best leads a fascinating discussion about the semiotics of the post-apocalypse in his paper, "The Post-Catastrophe Consciousness: The Semiotics of Alienation and Belief in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*." Continuing this dialogue on language, Peter Anto Johnson reviews multiple definitions of civilization in a post-apocalyptic context in "Perspectives of Civilization: New Beginnings After the End." Tynan Drake challenges Lee Quinby's denunciation of post-apocalyptic literature as unhealthy by demonstrating how these narratives can be used to foster social change instead of inspiring terror in his paper, "Change the Narrative: Empathy in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction." Bethany Benkert also recognizes the constructive potential of the post-apocalyptic narrative, this time in relation to gender equality, in her paper, "Hope for Change in the Post-Apocalypse: Gender Roles in *The Last of Us*." A similar call to social action is issued by Olivia Hershman in "Oppression, Storytelling, and Resistance in Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*," wherein she emphasizes the importance of personal narrative in developing the strength to overcome tyranny in a post-apocalyptic setting. Megan Schillereff continues the conversation on gender as she discusses the female posthuman awakening in the post-apocalyptic world of Tahereh Mafi's *Shatter Me* series in "The Post is Female." I examine a similar potential for a female-oriented post-apocalyptic narrative in my paper, "On Fungi, Future, and Feminism: An Ecofeminist Analysis of M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*." Katie Garrett discusses the hilarity behind some of the post-apocalyptic genre's most beloved ghouls in her paper, "The Evolution of Modern Zombie Comedies." Finally, Taylor Baugh examines some surprisingly hopeful representations of arguably the most important apocalyptic characters in literature in her paper, "The Four Horsemen in Popular Culture."

Post-apocalyptic literature is a dark genre, especially in today's world. However, we have an obligation to study this gloom with due diligence. For even in this gloom, life can surprise us with glimpses of extraordinary light, and only when we understand humanity for what it is—not only for its evils, but also for its true and indomitable goodness—can we approach our difficult world with the wisdom required to make positive and lasting changes. A couple of college students won't likely find solutions to all our problems, but,

nevertheless, we hope to create a space in which an eager mind can seek the answers. Sometimes we laugh inside of this space. Sometimes we cry. This is only human, only the way we cope with life on our swiftly tilting planet. But in the end, the *Digital Literature Review* works tirelessly to create our own calm, rational environment amidst the terrors of both reality and fiction, and we humbly invite the world to come into this place, to join us in our quest to understand even these bleakest frontiers of the human condition. Let us do so with peace and reason. I think that's what Madeleine L'Engle would have wanted.

So, sit down and make yourself comfortable. Let's talk.

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The Post-Catastrophe Consciousness: The Semiotics of Alienation and Belief in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*

by Brandon Best, *Cedarville University*

ABSTRACT

This essay explores how Samuel Beckett's Endgame portrays the post-apocalyptic consciousness. Using Walker Percy's semiotic theory to understand the play, this paper posits that Endgame shows the struggle for individuals to apprehend themselves amidst catastrophe without objectifying themselves. Unable to find a semiotic referent to identify themselves with, people experience alienation as shown in Endgame through Hamm and Clov. Through their struggle to place themselves in their post-apocalyptic context, Hamm and Clov show the futility of rationally ordering life amidst catastrophe.

In *Irrational Man*, William Barrett shows how the atrocities of World War II revealed to people in Western societies the disparity between their external power over nature and their impoverished ability to control that power (65). Though the West believed a rational organization of society would produce “uniform and continuous progress without limits” (Barrett 37), by the twentieth century, the increased economic production masked people’s inability to understand the “[ab]surd and unpredictable” realities of their own existence (Barrett 35). Both the Holocaust and the use of nuclear weapons produced a cultural apocalypse that, as James Berger explains in *After the End*, seemed “to annihilate, along with a physical population, all previous ways of thinking and that transform[ed] the world that follow[ed] so as to make it incommensurable with what went before” (61). The catastrophes of World War II followed by the potential of nuclear war throughout the 1950s compelled people to examine their ability to rationally understand the world and their own existence. In his 1957 play *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett examines humans’ ability to reasonably comprehend the world as Hamm and Clov struggle to make sense of their lives. Hamm, the master of the house, remains confined to his chair and unable to see, waiting to receive his painkiller from Clov, his unhappy servant. Hamm and Clov, trapped in an unknown post-apocalyptic setting, are unable to talk about the catastrophe that devastated their world and how they ended up in the house together. Though Clov intends to leave Hamm, he hesitates because “outside of [the house] is death” (Beckett 96). Both Hamm and Clov remain dissatisfied in their roles within the house but neither knows how to escape or change their master and servant relationship.

This essay uses semiotics to interpret Hamm and Clov's relationship within the context of the catastrophes of World War II. These catastrophes transformed how people understood their own experience because, as James Berger explains, apocalyptic effects of the Holocaust and nuclear weaponry created a "representational impasse" (13), obliterating previous historical narratives while impelling a reexamination "of how the remainder [of the world] has been transformed" (7). By examining how people order the world through language, a semiotic reading of *Endgame* interprets how Hamm and Clov's relationship reveals both the apocalyptic effects of World War II on language and the struggle to meaningfully restructure discourse afterward. The semiotic theory of the philosopher Walker Percy, who wrote during the same time as Beckett about similarly catastrophic events, can explain how humans can use signs to either objectify themselves or gain subjectivity and, ultimately, shows why Hamm's rationalized discourse alienates him from his own experience, accounting for his failure to find semiotic security in the post-apocalyptic world. Through showing Hamm's alienation from his own self in *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett reveals the meaninglessness of living rationally in a catastrophic world.

Philosopher William Barrett explains that as work became more abstracted and analytical throughout the twentieth century, people increasingly identified with their function within society. Because society only requires people to "perform competently [their] own particular social function," people identify with their function (Barrett 36). By identifying with something external to themselves, people allowed their being "to subsist as best it can—usually to be dropped below the surface of consciousness and forgotten" (Barrett 36). Western culture, "positivist to the core," exacerbated the contrast between people's external identity and their being as the modes of work in society (Barrett 38). This emphasized the manufacture of rational knowledge as corporations and the sciences attempted to develop a "complete systematization" of social life (Barrett 39). The progress of this systematization encouraged people to identify with their role within a system, stressing a rational understanding of themselves and their relationships to others. However, this rational understanding of one's social function encouraged people to develop a "strict and literal attachment to [the] objects" they associated with their function (Barrett 44). This "rampant extroversion" nearly led society to its own destruction during World War II as people threatened to destroy the world through genocide and weapons of mass destruction in order to protect their roles in society (Barrett 44), revealing that humankind's problems could not be solved through the exertion of external controls but only through the "change and conversion" of humans' entire being (Barrett 73).

Walker Percy, who was active in the decades following World War II, claims that this extroversion developed because people sought to understand their semiotic relationships rationally and became alienated from their own selves. Percy explains that people use signs—such as language, images, or sensory feelings—as “signifiers” to denote their experience (93). While these signs provide information about an experience, signs cannot wholly represent someone’s relationship to the “referent”—the actual experience the sign identifies (Percy 95). In recognizing this relationship, the individual begins to understand the signs around them and experiences consciousness, which Percy defines as the “act of attention to something under the auspices of its sign” (105). However, when people try to order their lives rationally, they lapse into “dyadic” semiotic relations and attempt to evaluate the signs they encounter in relation to other signs (Percy 91). By attempting to interpret their semiotic relationships rationally, people lose their ability to be conscious of their relationships with the world because they evaluate their semiotic relationships exclusively based on signs.

Failing to recognize the indirect nature of semiotic relationships, people attempt to identify with external signs and, in the process, alienate themselves from their own experience. Unable to examine the referents beneath the signs one encounters, the individual believes their world to be “totally construed by signs” (Percy 100). Yet, within this world of signs, “the self has no sign of itself” because the self is only composed by one’s experiences with the world (Percy 107). This paradox of a sign-less self compels the individual to attempt to place themselves in the world, though they can only do this through identifying with signs external to their own self in their search to discover “a permanent semiotic habiliment” (Percy 108). Through this futile search for semiotic security, as John Desmond, a Percy scholar, explains, the individual becomes alienated from themselves as they “objectif[y]” their own self with signs (Desmond 67). Though this objectification enables one’s self to temporarily transcend its subjective state, the self will “always incur the problem of ‘reentry,’ that is, the inevitable and often crushing return of the self to its existential, limited situation” (Desmond 80). “The pleasure of such transcendence,” Percy notes, “derives not from the recovery of self but from the loss of self,” and the same effect can often be accomplished through a dependence on anesthetics such as drugs or alcohol (124). Though these modes of transcendence allow the individual to escape their semiotic instability, the individual still must endure their subjective experience, which they no longer identify with and from which they have been alienated. As they endure the process of alienation from their experience, the individual will either regain consciousness by

recognizing the catastrophe of their own alienation or reassert their autonomy found in objectifying themselves with signs. The catastrophe of alienation compels the self to change its being towards semiotic consciousness or autonomy; and this change, Desmond writes, “was what most interested Percy . . . the question of what shape, what self-understanding would emerge in the post-catastrophe consciousness” (67). If the individual recognizes their catastrophe, they can search inward for a “recovery of being and a recognition of one’s place in reality” by questioning the signs they identify with (Desmond 66). But, if the self refuses to recognize this catastrophe, it will become autonomous in its pursuit of semiotic stability and, “believing in nothing, can fall prey to ideology and kill millions of people” (Percy 157). If the self rejects the experience it shares with other beings in order to maintain its semiotic identity, the autonomous self can use signs to rationalize endless violence in order to maintain its semiotic order.

During the 1950s, Western societies failed to interrogate the causes of violence during the Second World War and instead attempted to rationalize future violence as they prepared themselves for the potential of nuclear war. In his essay, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” Theodor Adorno describes society’s struggle to change in light of its moral failures, writing that “after the Second War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along . . . on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one’s own battered state” (122). Anything that remains the same after the war, such as “resurrected culture,” reveals itself to be incapable of change and existentially dead. The survivors cannot stop future violence by reflecting on their state intellectually but, instead, should only look to change themselves. Adorno suggests, to provoke this change, people should understand history only as it affects their existential predicament—“as decline” (125). However, ignoring the catastrophe of the war, people continued to rationalize violence through the expectations they established for the Cold War. Adorno noted dramatizations of nuclear war “hopelessly [falsified] the horror of historical anonymity by shoving it into the characters and actions of humans, and possibly by gaping at the ‘prominents’ who decide whether the button will be pushed” (123). By preparing audiences for the possibility of how war may come about and shifting blame onto a select few, these depictions legitimized nuclear war as a possibility in the future for all humankind.

To challenge society’s acceptance of future violence, Beckett used *Endgame* to show humans’ inability to rationalize their experience and compel them to reject violent ideologies. Beckett developed his beliefs about art and its relation to history while he visited

Nazi Germany between 1936 and 1937 as well as while he lived in Vichy France¹ during World War II (Kennedy 196). Both regimes horrified Beckett with their emphases on racial purity and cultish variations of nationalism (Kennedy 196). After witnessing the atrocities caused by these countries, Beckett said, “Art has nothing to do with clarity” and instead proposed that “art must express the mess of history, not rationalize it” because any rationalization of violence became complicit with it (qtd. in Kennedy 197). Beckett, realizing humanity’s willingness to resort to violence during the Cold War, wrote *Endgame* to interrogate humankind’s image of itself as a rational being that had already yielded to mass murder (Morin 64). As *Endgame* takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where many have died and the characters are surrounded by death, Hamm and Clov attempt to rationally understand their surroundings and fail to find meaning, only alienating themselves in the process. Reading *Endgame* in light of Walker Percy’s theories about selfhood, semiotics, and post-catastrophe consciousness can help show how the self, amidst catastrophe, manages to reassert its own rationality and secures its self-alienation.

Without a history to provide meaning for his life, Hamm fails to rationally understand his existence. As the play opens, “the room’s sole ornament, a picture turned against the wall, suggests the bearing of a collective history that can only be articulated in the negative” (Morin 61). Because history cannot provide a positive explanation for his life, Hamm must attempt to account for himself apart from any justification beyond the immediate context of his life. Though he doubts the meaning of his life—asking Clov, “Have you not had enough?”—Hamm still attempts to rationalize his existence within the room (Beckett 94). While his ratiocinations about his life contradict themselves, these claims display Hamm’s desire to transcend his existential predicament. Hamm claims to accept his state because “there’s no reason for it to change” (Beckett 94), but later argues to Clov, “We breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!” (Beckett 97). These contradictory claims reveal Hamm’s desire to rationalize his existence in order to transcend his immediate predicament. However, this reasoning fails to ease Hamm’s existential uncertainty, as after both attempts at explanation, he asks Clov, “Is it not time for my painkiller?” (Beckett 95-97). Hamm tries to anaesthetize himself in order to dull himself and his anxieties about his existence. Yet, because it is not yet “time for [his] painkiller” (Beckett 95- 97), Hamm fails to numb his existential anxieties. Still faced with the problem of his subjective existence, Hamm can only seek to identify with external signs even though this

¹ After the German takeover of France during World War II, the replacement French government that supported the Third Reich ruled southern France from Vichy. During this time, Beckett moved to the village of Roussillon, north of Avignon (McCormack 32).

identification alienates himself from his own experiences. After Clov denies him his painkiller again, Hamm recognizes the absurdity of his attempts to numb his condition and laments, “In the morning they brace you up and in the evening they calm you down. Unless it’s the other way round” (Beckett 104). Through being braced up and calmed down, Hamm recognizes that easing his pain does not change his condition or his ability to understand it. Understanding his own instability in the world, Hamm avoids introspection by trying to place himself within an external semiotic order. Hamm tells Clov to take him to “my place . . . in the center,” defining his own position in relation to the external room (Beckett 104). As Clov must gauge Hamm’s distance from each side of the room, this positioning makes no difference to Hamm who, being blind, cannot tell whether he sits equidistant from each wall or not (Beckett 104). By positioning himself in the center of the room, Hamm tries to identify with an external image of himself positioned rationally, though this idea of a “center” makes no difference in Hamm’s life because he cannot tell whether he is centered or not (Beckett 104). Hamm tries to find meaning through the externalized signs of his life as he later explains to Clov, “Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn’t he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough?” (Beckett 108). Through his attempt to see himself through the imagined lens of a rational being, Hamm becomes alienated from himself as he invests his self-conception with meaning not present in his actual experience. In his attempts to identify with an image of himself, Hamm externalizes meaning onto a sign apart from his actual experience.

With his self-understanding separated from his actual existence, Hamm alienates himself from the other beings he encounters as he reduces their relationships to the signs he witnesses, divesting their shared experience of meaning. To communicate to Hamm whether Clov has left him or has died, they create a system of signs to relay Clov’s fate to Hamm. Clov explains, “You whistle me. I don’t come. The alarm rings. I’m gone. It doesn’t ring. I’m dead” (Beckett 115). In this system, Hamm only knows Clov through the servant’s functional role within the home as indicated by the signs—the whistle, alarm rings, or silence—he produces rather than attempting to experience meaning together. The exchange of signs similarly dominates Hamm’s relationship with Nagg, his father who lives in the garbage can at the back of the stage, when Hamm promises Nagg a sugar-plum for listening to his story (Beckett 116). In that moment, Nagg does not listen to empathize or gain consciousness of Hamm’s being but, at the story’s end, only demands, “Me sugar-plum!” (Beckett 118). Hamm epitomizes his commitment to rational relationships as he tries to pray to God but rejects God after his prayer fails to generate a sign in response. Hamm declares, “The Bastard! He

doesn't exist!" (Beckett 120). Hamm refuses to believe in a God outside of his rational order. Yet, the failure of his rationality to make sense of his life becomes evident when Hamm and Clov disagree over the meaning of order within their house. Hamm, hearing Clov pick up objects lying on the ground, shouts, "Order!" (Beckett 120). But Clov responds, "I love order. It's my dream" and continues to pick up the objects (Beckett 120). Though both Hamm and Clov share the same experiences within the room, both have opposing conceptions about what a rational order means within the room. This divergence reveals that neither Hamm's nor Clov's rational order comes from their shared existence within the room, but that both their ideas of order remain independent of their own experience.

Because his rational order neglects to understand his own experience, Hamm cannot experience meaning in his life. Hamm displays his inability to have an experience when, after asking to be placed under a window of light, he exclaims, "That's what I call light! [Pause.] Feels like a ray of sunshine," before Clov tells him he is not actually in sunshine (Beckett 123). Hamm trusts his own rational order—telling Clov where to place him—rather than his own experience to learn where he sits in the room. Hamm realizes his failure to experience reality when he says, "I was never there" and "Absent always. It all happened without me. I don't know what's happened" (Beckett 128). Though recognizing his consciousness failed to engage with reality, this realization of his failure does not enable Hamm to experience meaning, as he remains unable to change his being and is trapped in his alienated consciousness where he can only see the external signs of his life. Even after Clov leaves and Hamm sits alone, he repeats his actions literally aloud: "Raise hat," "And put on again," "Wipe," "And put on again" (Beckett 133). Trapped by his own alienation, Hamm continues to identify with external signs of himself, unable to even experience the meaning of his loneliness.

Through showing the process of alienation Hamm endures in his search for a rational order in the world, *Endgame* displays how humans can continue to pursue autonomy through asserting their rational order instead of examining their role in the universe. As long as humans attempt to rationalize their experiences within the world, they will only perpetuate violence. By showing Hamm's alienation from his own experience, Samuel Beckett uses *Endgame* to show the futility of attempting rationally ordered life amidst catastrophe. Only by believing in something beyond their own idea of order in the world can humans begin to experience meaning and transform their being. Without surrendering their own ideas of order, people will remain alienated in post-apocalyptic discourses and impotent to restructure life to prevent future catastrophes.

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Perspectives of Civilization: New Beginnings After the End

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ABSTRACT

Civilization and nature are quite intimately connected, and, as a result, a catastrophic change in the environment can produce significant alterations to both the understandings and perceptions of civilization. This paper examines the views of Henry David Thoreau in an excerpt of Walden, William Cronon's perceptions in "The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Right Nature," and James Berger's analysis of representations of the post-apocalypse in his book After the End to explore how they differ and align in the context of the post-apocalypse.

Humans have an innate tendency to construct civilization according to changes in their landscape, which becomes quite apparent in a post-apocalyptic setting: society chooses to either adopt novel social structures or forsake law and order. Literature portrays the degradation or progression of such post-apocalyptic societies to reflect changes in the environment, oftentimes creating a conflicting dichotomy between the societies present before and after apocalyptic events have altered the surrounding nature. Time and again, assorted theories and conceptions on this construct of civilization reflect an incomplete understanding.

Civilization is a broad term, derived from its etymological Latin root word, *civis*, for citizen. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines civilization in two main ways: “1. [t]he stage of human social development and organization which is considered most advanced,” and “2. a place that offers the comfortable way of life of a modern society” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This essay aims to analyze the binary understandings of nature as both paradise and wasteland, the contemporary understandings of civilization and change, and nature and civilization's inseparable ties to the post-apocalyptic narrative.

In his essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” William Cronon (1995) employs the term civilization to denote an advanced social order—advanced not only in the economic and industrial sense but also in the moral sense. He deems that “it is all too easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair” when one oversteps “the margins of civilization” (Cronon). Instead of directly glamorizing civilization

as some form of moral compass with strictly defined conventions and social standards, Cronon belittles the “antithesis of an unnatural civilization”—wilderness. Presenting the heavenly appeal of nature as a sort of euphemism for the wilderness, Cronon attempts to define what civilization is not. Drawing a dividing line between human and nature, he strongly asserts that “wilderness leaves no place for human beings” and that “to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity, would . . . be suicide.” He then ridicules the paradoxical portrayal of nature as both “Satan’s home” and “God’s Own Temple” in the Bible and early romanticized narratives. Stretching the rift between demonic, barbarian wilderness and the divine, paradisiacal Garden of Eden, Cronon ascribes a sentiment of fictional fantasy and pretentiousness to both classifications. When its antithesis is assessed, Cronon’s syllogistic deduction that civilization must then be the most realistic form of existence for humanity seems sensible. In line with the aforementioned dictionary definitions, it also becomes apparent that civilization provides the “most advanced” and “comfortable way of life” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

After firmly establishing this denotation for civilization, Cronon consolidates this claim even further by refuting definitions “of urban-industrial civilization as confining, false, and artificial” that renders individuals “faceless, collective, [and] contemptible” (Cronon). Selecting for rebuttal the extended metaphor of civilization as the “human disease . . . infect[ing] the Earth,” he paraphrases these individuals’ claim that the “best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living” (Cronon). Implicit sarcasm and reproach in Cronon’s tone are brought to light as he denounces nature and compliments civilization. In fact, this modified restatement also reveals Cronon’s mobilization of the term civilization to conjure connotations of refinement. This is one common sentiment that resounds with many of Cronon’s critics, such as Alice Ingerson. Refinement, as invoked by Cronon’s use of the term civilization, is often synonymous with concepts such as advancement and enhancement. How, then, does Cronon define these concepts? One can think of these terms in relation to evolution as a form of natural selection that follows the principle of the survival of the fittest—a principle that also appears in post-apocalyptic literature. Civilization would then be the society that is thriving under natural pressures that oppose survival. It becomes clear that “there can be no escape from manipulating and working and even killing some parts of nature to make our home” as it would be the most civilized approach (Cronon). Rather than a nomadic, primeval lifestyle, a modernized urban civilization is more pragmatic, as it offers better prospects of survival.

Henry David Thoreau (1854) turns the notions of human constructionism and survival on their heads in an excerpt from his book, *Walden*. The satirical work perceives civilization as chaotic bedlam as opposed to the “comfortable way of life” described by the second definition: civilization, to Thoreau, offers nothing but shackles and chains restraining the lives of individuals with social burdens (*Oxford English Dictionary*). (Notably, this epiphany often arises after an apocalyptic catastrophe.) It is neither comfortable nor a way of life; more precisely, it is a “chopping sea of civilized life”—a place unfit for living (Thoreau 119). It is a place in which we are awoken “by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor” instead of our “Genius” (Thoreau 116). This mechanical artificiality of civilization constantly drains us of life, physically and mentally.

Thoreau is also a devout advocate of simplicity. In his argument, urban sprawl, busyness, and hectic affairs are aspects of civilization that make it “deadly slow” (Thoreau 124). Civilization is not some social refuge; on the contrary, it is a pandemonium of social indoctrination and classical conditioning of the mindless masses. Exhibited by Thoreau’s slate of individuals as “sleepers,” the insentient and comatose state of mental consciousness within the institution of civilization is fully unveiled (120). Those deluded and comforted by the monotonous and perpetual design of civilizations are those whose vitality and vigor have been numbed by “slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows” (Thoreau 125). They “establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit” in spite of its “purely illusory foundations” (Thoreau 125). Ironically, it is the presence of the plethora of labors and affairs that create such a trance-like lethargy in individuals. Civilization conditions these sleepers to awake, not by “Genius” (Thoreau 116) or conscious rousings, but rather by “mechanical aids” and “factory bells”—programmed stimuli (Thoreau 117). The robotic and automated response displayed by the “sound sleepers” who “devote days and nights to the work” are, in Thoreau’s mind, foundational to schemes of civilization (120). Otherwise, “who will build railroads?” (Thoreau 120). Progress would not be feasible if these sleepers were conscious of their fate under civilization, which is a destiny often only fully realized following the disaster of a post-apocalyptic scenario. Without these human drones, projects like the railroad would be incomplete, and society would be incapable of advancing, which is no loss to humanity as such “internal improvements . . . are all external and superficial” (Thoreau 120). Thoreau employs the extended metaphor of civilization as “an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense” (Thoreau 120). With Thoreau in mind, it becomes obvious that civilization is the polar opposite of the socially organized and most “advanced society”

painted in the first dictionary definition and envisioned by Cronon (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Under Thoreau, nature is an entity that, while derelict in modern society, holds a supreme value, an entity that could be fully understood when the environment is disrupted by an apocalyptic event that forces society to desert their modern tools.

In contemporary society, however, the view of civilization as “comfortable” and the “most advanced” still dominates the dubious Thoreauvian censure by far, even in more objective resources such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. By ignoring Thoreau’s criticism, the mauling, brainwashing tendencies of modern civilization continues to permeate humanity, as seen in the article “Why Modern Civilization Is a Vicious Circle” by Shane Parrish (2016). The distinctive notion that civilization “has its priorities messed up, [and] that we need to live in the moment” raises the same issue Thoreau identified (Parrish 22). Modernity and materialism are instruments of civilization that “stimulate our sense organs until they become insensitive,” until we become sound sleepers (Parrish 22). This opinion is extended to suggest another reason as to “why all affairs of civilization are rushed” (Parrish 22). It is essential to note that “the civilized man does not know what he wants” and works under civilization for unattainable, abstract purposes: “success, fame, a happy marriage, fun, to help other people, or to become a ‘real person’” (Parrish 23). Such promises and guarantees of civilization are “constantly retreating phantom[s],” as one is eternally chasing but never attaining these goals (Parrish 22). According to Parrish, humans differ from animals in that they must utilize “the highest possible amount of consciousness, alertness, and chronic insomnia” in the pursuit of more material stimulation (Parrish 22). This utensil of civilization—this bombardment of luxuries and wants—progressively functions to desensitize the individual, rendering them “incapable of real pleasure, insensitive to the most acute and subtle joys of life” (Parrish 22). In this way, modern civilization is a vicious cycle—a world in which natural selection has yielded not an ethically upright, progressive society but has rather provided a contradictory stage of social regress and moral decay under a material hegemony.

After reviewing the positive and negative commentary on the nature of modern civilization, one might then question how civilization would evolve or regress after a core-shaking apocalyptic event. The theory is tested and analyzed in James Berger’s *After the End* as he combines historical, academic, and literary evidence to consider civilization’s “aftermath and remainders,” many analyses of which are reminiscent of Thoreauvian conceptions and Cronon’s ideas about civilization (xii). In his introductory examination of trauma, Berger makes an explicit connection to historical events such as the Holocaust, the

Vietnam War, and slavery in early America—events which mirror much of apocalyptic literature and which underscore its relevance to modern day civilization. He sheds light on the irony of the end as post-apocalyptic literature rarely ever offers any ending: in fact, a catastrophic event generally paves a new beginning to a different form of civilization, whether that is a dystopia or utopia.

Additionally, Berger contemplates ideas of trauma from a perspective suggested by Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytical works. While Freud's discussion centers around identifying the internal, psychological factors that are modified as a result of calamity, Berger examines a larger picture, analyzing the role of social culture in trauma by bringing in Slavoj Žižek's contemporary thinking on the "destabilizing intrusion of the Real into a symbolic order" (Berger 25). The representational systems—the symbolic orders that play a role in all societies—suddenly, in post-apocalyptic literature, become disrupted by catastrophic changes in the environment—the Real. Such a violent interruption paves the way to anarchy and other persisting social products, which are direct results result of this trauma. This is seen most vividly in Žižek's later reference to a "natural cycle of generation and corruption," a concept which parallels Parrish's description of the vicious cycle but also expounds upon it by suggesting that the "absolute death—the destruction . . . liberates nature from its own laws" (Berger 43).

Berger's analysis of underlying ideologies that shape a new post-apocalyptic civilization is strongly rooted in his belief that there are two-part, internal variables, such as trauma, and external variables like geography and surrounding environment, contributing to the adoption of new social structures suggested by Doyle and the resulting formation of novel cultures (Doyle). Berger expands his commentary on social environment as he evaluates the scenery following the abolishment of slavery. One might believe that Berger's investigation of the abolition of slavery would yield a perception of civilization that aligns with the first dictionary definition, as abolition constituted what many deem to be advancement in human rights and law. However, Berger's analysis goes further to imply the legacies of slavery still permeate even after the end; in this way, civilization has not aided humanity in becoming its most ethically advanced iteration—the view espoused by Cronon—but has rather served as a safe haven for degrading and inhumane practices—as posited by Thoreau.

Evaluated independently, each text conveys civilization with utterly different or identical denotations; taken together, the texts show the multidimensional and multifarious propensity of the term. In "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong

Nature,” Cronon supports the definition of civilization as the “most advanced” form of human organization by juxtaposing its practicality against the hyperbolic and embellished claims concerning wilderness, its antithesis (*Oxford English Dictionary*). *Walden* depicts civilization as an anesthetizing establishment intended to brainwash its civilians by promoting lives as what essentially amounts to hurried, mechanical humanoids and programmable tools. Parrish’s commentary also sheds light on this progressive computerization, systemization, and exploitation that civilization perpetrates by proclaiming apparitional vows of success, money, and an unattainable better future. In juxtaposition, Berger’s *After the End* plays a culminating role in drawing lines that connect progression and deterioration of civilization as consequences of cataclysmic changes in the environment. Taken as a whole, Cronon’s views are contradictory to the beliefs of Thoreau and Parrish, while Berger recognizes the persistence of both views post-apocalyptically. Critically, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” presents a definition of civilization consistent with the dictionary definitions that advertise civilization as advanced in every aspect and as the most rational solution for human progress, whereas *Walden* denies these claims, insisting instead that civilization is an immoral and degenerating organization with superficial purposes that program its civilians to become more automated, mechanical, and repetitive. While Cronon persists in epitomizing civilization as a prototype designed by, and refined by, the pressures of survival to overcome the savagery of primeval nomadism and hunter-gatherer lifestyles, Parrish exposes the fact that such an advanced model only deprives mental energy and deteriorates our lives by employing exhausting amounts of rush, hurry, and superfluity. Both *Walden* and “Why Modern Civilization is a Vicious Circle” correspond in stance; however Thoreau is more apprehensive of the exhaustive, inertial feature of civilization to render individuals paralyzed and disoriented, where Parrish emphasizes the illusions of modernity, the materialism contrived by civilization, and the insatiable hunger for pleasure that results in an eternal, progress-hostile immobility. Berger examines these views in their entirety, coming to the conclusion that the forces of nature have the power to progress or diminish a civilization after an apocalyptic catastrophe; however, more importantly, Berger claims that the new beginnings and changes that occur rely greatly on the sociopolitical environment and sentiment that remains even after calamity. These findings are significant as it demonstrates that the post-apocalypse can become a moment of hope in rebuilding civilization in a better image.

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Change the Narrative: Empathy in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

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ABSTRACT

*In post-apocalyptic fiction, the concept of empathy often is depicted as a weakness that the characters cannot afford if they hope to survive. This depiction leads to harmful perceptions on the value of empathy and its ability to avert apocalyptic catastrophes. By examining David Clement-Davies young adult novel *The Sight* through theories of narrative empathy and through James Berger's theories of post-apocalyptic representation, this essay argues that by representing empathic understanding, fiction writers have the power to influence positive changes in real world situations. By representing the need to teach empathy for all people, regardless of their differences, and the harm a lack of empathy can cause on both a personal level and on a large societal scale, this novel encourages future generations to seek peaceful and empathic solutions instead of repeating the cataclysmic mistakes of their forebearers.*

Post-apocalyptic fiction has often been criticized as a source of fear mongering and of dangerous fantasization about the end of the world. Critics such as James Berger have argued that this imagining of the end times diverts too much attention towards the perceived horrors of an uncertain future rather than focusing on the real problems of the present. As Berger states in *After the End*, “The most dystopic visions of science fiction can do no more than replicate the actual historical catastrophes of the twentieth century” (xiii). Though this argument definitely highlights the importance of actually taking action once a real threat has been understood, it fails to recognize the important role that narratives—particularly fiction narratives—play in developing a person’s perception of the apocalypse and of the empathy required to prevent it. The ability to empathize with other people is critical for an individual’s motivation to take action in correcting societal problems. In this paper, I examine *The Sight*, a young adult novel by David Clement-Davies, and its themes of empathy and apocalyptic thinking. In essence, *The Sight* presents a powerful message on how stories construct the future. I will explore how post-apocalyptic fiction can help inspire empathy and bridge the gap between understanding and activism. In addition, I will emphasize the importance of moving the focus of post-apocalyptic fiction away from messages of inevitable catastrophe and towards opportunities for social change.

In most post-apocalyptic fiction, the story is based around the struggles for survival after a cataclysmic event, but the reality of apocalyptic events is that they have already occurred all around us. From the Holocaust to natural disasters, large-scale wars, and devastating plagues, our world has already seen one apocalyptic event after another, many of which have served as the inspiration for these after-the-end kind of stories (Berger, *After the End* xii-xiii). *The Sight* presents a sort of paradox among post-apocalyptic fiction as its own story touches on the repetitive history of apocalyptic events, dipping even into a near-metafictional narrative at times as it contemplates the driving social forces behind apocalyptic events and their recurrence throughout history. During the whole of the novel, the characters question whether the story's central prophecy is really a prediction of the future or if it is a memory of the past repeating itself, bringing out an apocalyptic event that has been seen before and has been passed down through the generations as story and legend.

Many people think of the apocalypse as a single destructive event that overshadows all the horrors of before—a true end of the world and all we know—but as James Berger states in *After the End*, “Very few apocalyptic representations end with the End. There is always some remainder, some post-apocalyptic debris, or the transformation into paradise” (34). In essence, for the post-apocalypse to exist, the world must continue to exist even after the cataclysmic event, and therefore it is in the real world history of horrors that we find the true “world ending” events of post-apocalyptic fiction.

The irony about these kinds of events is that no matter how horrifying or eye-opening they are at the time of their occurrence, the human race has the remarkable, and often detrimental, ability to erase the evidence of what happened. Cities that were bombed in warfare are rebuilt and made to look exactly as they had before the destructive event (Berger, *After the End* 20). Genocides are quickly forgotten within a few generations, either being covered up or justified as a necessity, often by some nationalistic or religious agenda. Manifest Destiny was a common excuse for the genocide of Native Americans, and as the last of the Holocaust survivors pass away, we are already beginning to forget the stories they've told, the agony of the horrors they faced, and the dangers of allowing a prejudiced tyrant to seize control.

In *Trauma and Memory*, Dennis A. Foster's review of Berger's *After the End*, Foster states, “What Berger wants to produce, and what he wants other historians to produce, is ultimately not the meaning or significance of the apocalyptic event—such terms displace the event and lead to its forgetting—but its continued presence as the most true thing in our

world” (740-741). Though critics and writers of post-apocalyptic fiction differ in opinions on what this genre actually accomplishes, these scholars essentially want the same thing: to see our world turn away from the harmful paths it has taken so far and to avoid the terrible futures many have grown to fear. Not heeding the warnings of authors and critics would, in itself, be a dangerous path towards the ever-present threat of an apocalyptic future, but the line between bringing the horrors of real apocalyptic events to light and indulging in the fantasy of wiping the slate clean is a fine one to tread; however, this is a line that I believe David Clement-Davies’ *The Sight* balances with thoughtful precision.

In this paper, I am arguing that *The Sight* deviates from traditional apocalyptic fiction by focusing on the social forces that build up to the inciting cataclysm rather than on the consequences and hardships of the post-cataclysm world. *The Sight* represents an optimistic perspective of how empathic understanding can be used to avert apocalypse rather than relying on the traditional scare tactics that many post-apocalyptic stories seem to employ in the hopes of avoiding catastrophe. Within this paper I will discuss how post-apocalyptic fiction can motivate readers to take action against dangerous potential futures, but I will take it a step further by arguing that this fiction has a responsibility to advocate for change and to provide guidance for the proposed action. In the first section of this paper, I will introduce the plot, the key characters, and the major themes within *The Sight*, and I will examine how it both fits within and deviates from typical apocalyptic literature. The second section will discuss representations of empathy in *The Sight* and the potential that narrative empathy possesses for inspiring social activism. Finally, I will conclude the essay with a suggestion for how authors of post-apocalyptic fiction can work to change the future by redirecting the focus of the narratives they tell.

THE STORY OF THE SIGHT

The story of *The Sight* follows Larka and her family, a pack of intelligent wolves caught up in the middle of a brutal period of civil war. On one side, Larka’s aunt Morgra, the main antagonist, is trying to fulfill a world-ending prophecy. The prophecy can only be fulfilled by an individual who wields the psychic powers of the Sight. Whoever fulfills the prophecy and claims the ultimate power of the Sight will gain the power to control others in mind and body and will also release the Vision for all living creatures to see, a knowledge that all need to possess. On the other side of the conflict, the Rebels band together in opposition of Morgra, proclaiming that all who believe in or speak about the superstitions of the Sight are enemies of the wolves and should be treated as allies to Morgra. For the

purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on the stories of Larka and Morgra and the ways their two stories intertwine. Each of them faces violence and persecution at the hands of others, and both are born into a world that fears, and doesn't understand, the powers of the Sight that they are born with. Their stories parallel each other in many ways, and at times it appears that their worldviews are very similar, but there is one key difference that changes the course of their stories: while Morgra is always forced to suffer alone, denied the basic need of all social creatures to be accepted, understood, and shown empathy, Larka is always surrounded by friends, family, and allies. Even as Larka is violently ripped away from her companions, she is never alone, immediately being enveloped into the comfort and support of new allies or else being reunited with old friends and family. The differences in their stories can be seen in the opportunities they are given to heal from the traumas they faced, and in turn this show of empathy (or lack of it) influences the ways they treat others.

The Sight itself is a psychic ability that certain individuals are born with, and the truths surrounding its existence are steeped in controversy, misinformation, and distress. While many fearful rumors circulate among the wolves about what the Sight is actually capable of, the confirmed powers of the Sight include the ability to see through the eyes of other animals; the capacity to view distant realities of the past, present, and future in reflective surfaces such as water; and the power to heal the minds and bodies of others. In some legends, those possessing the Sight are said to have the power to call spirits of the dead from an alternate world and the ability to travel to that other world themselves, as well as the capacity to curse and even control other living creatures. The Sight is viewed by some as mystical or even evil, while others view it as natural and believe that long ago all living creatures could harness its powers.

As James Berger states in *After the End*, "Trauma is the psychoanalytical form of apocalypse, its temporal inversion. Trauma produces symptoms in its wake, after the event, and we reconstruct trauma by interpreting its symptoms, reading back in time" (20). Larka and Morgra both are exposed to traumatic events that shape their future personalities. For Larka, the formative events of trauma, loss, and sorrow lead her to seek an understanding of others and drive her to show mercy and forgiveness even towards those who consider her an enemy. Morgra, on the other hand, grows bitter and resentful from her experiences, which in time turns her towards a destructive path as she seeks revenge in her pursuit to fulfill the prophecy of the Sight. This show of empathy and compassion is denied to Morgra from the time of her birth. Her abilities with the Sight are feared by her pack, eventually leading to the false accusations that cause her banishment and her first steps towards seeking the

fulfillment of an apocalyptic end.

Larka often questions what the purpose of the Sight really is and what the responsibilities of wielding its power are. She discovers the wonderful ways it can be used to communicate with others, from seeing through the eyes of a bird and experiencing their way of life, to seeing into the hearts of others to understand—and even try to heal—their pain. Ultimately the Sight itself is determined as neither evil nor good but simply as a source of knowledge, and therefore of power, to be used however the wielder chooses.

Morgra also is forced to undertake this journey to discover the meaning of the Sight, but her experiences lead her to a different conclusion. Because she is cast out from her pack and banished for a crime she doesn't commit, she harbors much bitterness. In the first scene from Morgra's point of view, Clement-Davies says,

Resentment was her birthright. Long before she had been driven out they had feared her for her strange ways, even as a cub. How she had yearned for affection, and as she grew, she had craved cubs of her own. She had ached to share so much with others, to be a pack wolf and share the secrets she was learning about the Sight. About Life. She had ached to be allowed to love something. (184)

Though Morgra craves connection with others, she often suffers great pain and injustice instead. Instead of being shown empathy in the critical moments, she is treated with fear, resentment, and hatred. The pain and isolation she feels as a child, knowing that her family views her as strange, even dangerous, is devastating to her perception of self. As Morgra's anger and bitterness grow from the betrayals that follow her throughout her life, she begins to accept the only identity that is allowed her. As such, the fear and resentment she feels transform into malignant anger, until the only thing she believes in anymore is the power to control and manipulate others, hoping that at least in this she can't be hurt again. These feelings drive her to seek the fulfillment of the prophecy, an act which in itself is a final, misguided, and desperate attempt to obtain the empathy she craves. Like many who are denied empathy when they need it most, she lashes out at those who she perceives to have hurt her, feeling that if they won't share love with her, then she will make them all feel her pain.

The prophecy that *The Sight* revolves around is closely related to concepts of memory and empathy, and to the power both have to change the course of history and, by extension, the world itself. The prophecy itself talks about empathy and understanding as a means to overcome fear, hatred, and despair. Some of the most critical lines of the prophecy say, “And only a family both loving and true, / May conquer the evil, so ancient, so new. / As they fight

to uncover what secrets they share / And see in their journey how painful is care” (Clement-Davies 175). These lines specifically speak of the need for empathy and for the understanding of the traumas others have experienced in order to conquer the true evil which the next line speaks of: “Beware the Betrayer, whose meaning is strife” (Clement-Davies 175). The Betrayer becomes a source of anxiety throughout the novel, always coming up at critical turns as the characters each fearfully wonder who will betray them. In the end, Larka says to Morgra, “Don’t you know yet who the Betrayer really is? Hate is the Betrayer, Morgra, for it feeds on itself. Hate and its mother, Fear” (Clement-Davies 446).

The presence of the prophecy in the story functions as a symbol of how the stories and knowledge passed down from one generation to the next influence the actions of future generations and how, in turn, those future generations impact the world.

Ironically, though Morgra is presented as a true believer in the Sight and in the prophecy connected to it, she also presents a bit of a paradox, actively scorning the family for believing in her curse and claiming they have become the curators of their own demise through their fear of it. She also scorns those who believe in a literal interpretation of the foretold events, openly acknowledging to her closest conspirator that even a symbolic representation of many of the required signs is enough to drive the course of history towards very real, and often deadly, consequences. As she actively pursues the prophecy, she makes use of the fear and superstition among the wolves to manipulate events behind the scenes, exploiting these legends, even though she does not believe in them, as she drives the world towards a terrible end in which, as the prophecy claims, “[n]one shall be free” (Clement-Davies 207).

EMPATHY AND THE APOCALYPSE

The Sight is told from the viewpoint of intelligent wolves who live in an imagined civilization that mirrors various dominant human cultures and religions. The wolves’ civilization lives alongside real historical humans of Transylvania and the surrounding areas, but their civilization is unknown to the humans, who are too preoccupied with their own conflicts to recognize the value in the lives of others. To the humans, the wolves are mere animals, and the events of *The Sight*, with its world-ending prophecy, pass by unbeknownst to the human world, just as many human apocalypses pass by unbeknownst to people who are not directly affected by the atrocities committed against people of other cultures or in other places of the world.

Though the story of *The Sight* does include humans in specific key instances, the

majority of the action and plot is performed by the wolves themselves and centers around their conflicts with one another. *The Sight* works as a commentary upon human catastrophes by creating a story that parallels these real world histories. The narrative of real world atrocities is repeated in the story of the wolves as they turn on one another in a brutal civil war that is born from nationalistic pride, which is itself a fearful response to a world-ending prophecy. In his essay, “Introduction: Twentieth-Century Apocalypse: Forecasts and Aftermaths,” James Berger says,

In representations after the Second World War, the apocalypse became, to a greater degree, a matter of retrospection. It had already happened. The world, whether it knew it or not, was a ruin, a remnant. More destruction could occur, but it could only be more of the same. Nothing more could be revealed. All subsequent, post-apocalyptic destruction would be absolutely without meaning, mere repetition. (390)

The flaw I see in this representation of apocalypse is the concept that it is the destruction that creates or inspires meaning and revelation. *The Sight*, by contrast, counters this concept by suggesting that it isn't the pain, trauma, or destruction of apocalyptic events that gives it meaning but rather the ways in which people respond to that trauma. The choices people make in how they treat one another—friends, loved ones, enemies—define what future generations will learn from the experience and whether or not the mistakes of the past will be repeated once more. The lessons people learn from apocalypse can be ones of fear and anger, or they can be ones of empathy and understanding.

Reading fiction has long been credited with the ability to instill empathy in readers, and by extension, to motivate change in how they view the world, themselves, and others. These changes in view influence readers' actions and choices and can make a lasting impact on how they interact with the world around them. According to Suzanne Keen,

Narrative empathy means feeling with fiction. A common experience of immersion readers, a frequently, though not universally, cultivated effect of fictions, and a desired outcome of many novelists, filmmakers, and storytellers, narrative empathy features in accounts both of emotional triggers in imaginative experiences of reading and of empirical studies of shifts in readers' feelings while encountering literary texts. (296)

A book like *The Sight*, which follows the narrative of multiple characters, provides an opportunity for a wide range of narrative empathy. Because the story closely follows characters on all sides of the conflict, it allows readers to see from different perspectives

and creates an opportunity through which they can understand the thoughts, emotions, and motivations of each character. These individual representations help readers to understand each character on a more rounded level than many narratives provide, encouraging readers to feel empathy for the pain or love the characters feel and encouraging an understanding of character motives, even when readers don't agree with their actions.

According to P. Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp in "How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy," reading fiction that inspires an empathic response (known as narrative empathy) can have a longer-lasting impact on the thoughts and views of readers than many other kinds of writing, including non-fiction accounts of real events. Often the impact doesn't manifest immediately after the reading occurs, but emerges later in a phenomena known as the "absolute sleeper effect" (Bal and Veltkamp 3). The absolute sleeper effect occurs when the mind has time to mull something over in its subconscious, and it is the reason why walking away from a difficult problem for a time helps many people solve it with ease once they return (Bal and Veltkamp 3-4).

When applying the theory of the absolute sleeper effect to the influences of reading fiction, Bal and Veltkamp believe that "the effects of fiction reading on empathy will increase over time rather than present itself directly after the experience" (3). As Bal and Veltkamp say, "When people are transported into fictional narratives, they are better in remembering the story, because they were more intensely involved in reading the story, which enables mental representations afterwards. Hence, fictional narratives as mental simulation of real world events deepen the readers' general tendencies to feel empathy with other people" (3). When a story like *The Sight*, in which the core message is to learn and express empathy for others, succeeds in transporting the reader into the narrative, it provides an opportunity to create a message in readers' minds that they are more likely to carry into their daily lives.

It is this concern that causes some people to view apocalyptic literature as a negative influence, fearing that the representation of world-ending conflicts represents an underlying desire for such events (Berger, *After the End* xiii). Suzanne Keen cautions in "Readers' Temperaments and Fictional Character" that "failing to confront the potentially negative effects of vicious or Machiavellian applications of narrative empathy" could potentially lead to readers identifying with the justifications of conflict (297). I think it is worth acknowledging that if *The Sight* were written in a way that glorified its conflict or Morgra's violent and manipulative behavior, it very well could create an opportunity for readers to draw a harmful message from their reading. However, I believe there is immense value in

showing even antagonists as victims and in telling the story from their perspective, not to justify their actions, but to show the real pain and suffering they experienced. Through this understanding, I believe people can learn from the mistakes of the past by better understanding the impact their own actions have on others.

In *The Sight*, the perspective of Morgra, among other antagonistic characters, shows the cultural and historical hurts that have been passed down to her, and it highlights the empathy she should have been offered in order to prevent her sorrow and bitterness. This representation neither glorifies nor condemns her for what she suffers but instead demonstrates that, while the way she is treated is wrong, her suffering does not excuse her actions in hurting others. Morgra never should have to suffer the way she does, but like real apocalyptic events, her trauma is not inevitable. It is made possible because of other people's choices, which are influenced by cultural fear.

James Berger addresses the idea that no historical event is inevitable. On this subject he states in his book *After the End* that “no event can be understood on the basis of prophetic signs and portents, and that history moves on the basis of contingencies, choices, accidents, and possibilities” (21). The term that Berger gives to this phenomenon is “sideshadowing,” which refers to “the description of historical alternatives, the other things that could have happened but did not, and an empirical—not a retrospectively prophetic—analysis of why the catastrophe occurred” (*After the End* 21). The stories of Larka and Morgra demonstrate sideshadowing, for the story of each parallels that of the other as an alternate possibility and shows numerous moments when the story could have changed as their individual choices—and the choices of others—alter the course of history.

When it comes down to the final deciding moment—when it is certain that one way or another the prophecy will be fulfilled—Larka steps in to claim the Sight's ultimate power before Morgra can, and she discovers that it is not at all what the wolves had expected. The truth of the ultimate power was knowledge of the world itself, from the moment the planet was formed to the evolution of life, and the knowledge that humans are animals too. The Vision continues to show how one day, human ingenuity would create wondrous creations but how it would also make weapons of mass destruction. The Vision shows the horrors of future conflicts from genocides to nuclear warfare and the ways in which humans have already begun to destroy the world around them. The Vision ends with a total destruction of the world's environments as the planet floods and freezes, leaving the world covered in ice.

In this moment, Morgra tempts Larka to use the power and knowledge she's acquired to control all of nature so that she might wipe out the human race before it can destroy the

world. Her aunt challenges her to use the powers of the Sight for destruction and violence, claiming that it is the only choice left to save all of life. For a despairing moment, Larka truly considers the option her aunt presents, but it is in another way of thinking that Larka finds the solution. All throughout the novel, Larka has sought an answer to what the purpose of the Sight really is, and in this moment she knows. The Sight is the ability to see the truth of the world in all its horrors and beauty. When Larka's closest friend, Kar, despairs in the knowledge that everyone dies one day, she consoles him by saying, "Perhaps only when we know that can we truly begin to live. To see the wonder of it all, not the darkness" (Clement-Davies 458-459). Larka shows that it is the ability to empathize that has the true capacity to change history. By seeing through the eyes of others and learning compassion for them, she learns that all life is worth valuing. The Sight is the power to use knowledge and compassion to change the future for the better, and it is in this that she places her faith.

After seeing the Vision and the destructive power of humans, Larka proclaims, "If this is their freedom, I do not want it" (Clement-Davies 442). In this moment she realizes how terrible a responsibility it is to have the power to alter the world and to control the lives of others, and so she accepts the knowledge that the Vision has given her but refuses to use the final power to control other living creatures, even when doing so would have saved her own life in a final tragedy that claims both her and Morgra.

Though the story of *The Sight* follows the concept of an end-of-the-world prophecy, even this prophecy is revealed to not be what it seems. The message that *The Sight* presents is that there is no predetermined future. Instead, it is the choices made by each person, their actions, and how they choose to treat others that shape the future. The future can be apocalyptic or peaceful, but no matter what happens, there is still hope. No matter how bad things get, the world can still change and recover. Life can go on. *The Sight* shows that it is never too late to make the right choice: a person can choose to change their path if they let go of their fear and anger and learn to accept help and empathy when it is offered, and by doing so, people can learn to empathize with others, to forgive instead of hate, and to overcome their fear of difference.

Some, like Morgra, never break the cycle, their fear driving them to reject the empathy that is shown them, as they have forgotten how to have empathy for others. Morgra's path is not a set or predetermined one, but it is one that she walks for so long that she no longer feels that she has the power to change her view of the world. *The Sight* presents our worldview as the place where our actions start, determining how we treat others, ourselves, and the world around us. Additionally, it is through our worldviews that

we pass on values to the next generation. Through our stories, actions, and words, we leave an impact on the world and on the future generations who inherit it. That impact in turn influences how each successive generation will shape the next, stretching indefinitely into the future.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

Throughout history it has become easy, and even encouraged politically and socially, to retell stories of violence, anger, and fear in a concept known as “conflict-supporting narratives.” According to Daniel Bar-Tal et al., who are scholars of social psychology, “conflict-supporting narratives play a major role not only in the eruption of conflicts, but especially in their persistence—as well as in the use of violent means that often violate moral codes of conduct, and in the difficulty in resolving them peacefully” (662-663). Bar-Tal et al. describe these narratives as a means to justify the conflict by dehumanizing and delegitimizing the rival group, glorifying the “image of the in-group” while also presenting the in-group as the sole victims of the situation (665). All of this is done to create a justification in the minds of the in-group for the conflict that “serves as a psychological permit to harm the rival group” (665). Reasonably, if narratives for supporting a conflict employ methods of dehumanizing and therefore reducing empathy and understanding for the rival group, then the attempts to prevent future conflicts must include a desire to tell stories that facilitate an understanding of and empathy with others, even when their goals, values, or way of life may seem in opposition to that of the audience and storyteller.

In the author’s note that David Clement-Davies wrote for *The Sight*, he states that the story’s dark progression was inspired by the war-torn history of Romania and surrounding lands, particularly the war that erupted in Yugoslavia at the end of the twentieth century. In relation to this, Clement-Davies says, “It was a war in which so many symbols of the past were used to manipulate and destroy, so a major theme became how all of us are bound up in the past, not only in terms of family myths but the stories we tell to interpret the world, and how that can keep us in negative cycles. How, too, so many of the borders of fear we erect between one another are about competing narratives” (555). These competing narratives are often the sources of the uncertainty that generate doubt and fear in conflicting cultures; from that doubt and fear stems a driving need to reestablish a feeling of certainty in one’s own beliefs, culture, and way of life, often to the detriment and destruction of cultures and peoples whose worldviews contradict or even slightly deviate from their own.

Much like Clement-Davies’ own message in *The Sight*, Berger concludes the

introduction to *After the End* with the following message: “I hope . . . not only to describe the overwhelming, often denied traumatic presences of the past that characterize our post-apocalyptic/‘postmodern’ present but also to suggest ways for ‘coming to terms’ with the past, for moving toward a future with moderate hopefulness, yet without amnesia” (xx). The final power of the Sight is tied to the idea of memory, a power that the novel often acknowledges as serving humans better than the animals, which in itself is an ironic concept given the final revelation that humans are animals too. It is forgetfulness that is said to hamper the animals, and it is the power of memory that gives humans the greatest ability to alter the world around them. The need to remember history is the need to remember the stories of pain, injustice, and wrongdoing so that future generations can learn empathy for those who have been made to suffer in the past. The hope is that, through remembering these stories, future generations will be able to move forward in a way that teaches people to be conscious to not hurt others in the way those of the past were hurt.

The final message which the realization of the prophecy brings is this: if humans can’t curb their destructive ways and learn to empathize with and understand one another, then they will surely bring about their own destruction as they destroy the world around them. In order to move towards a different future, one in which humans can avoid foreseeable catastrophes, people will have to learn to move past their own fear and the hatred it inspires and will have to learn to find ways to work together and to value and preserve all life. David Clement-Davies presents a hopeful view of the future in *The Sight*, one that shows a possibility frozen in time, like algae waiting for the ice to thaw after an icy apocalypse so that life could begin again (443). Even when the path ahead seems to grow too narrow, leaving no other way out, it is never too late to change course. The choices that people make every single day about how they treat others and how they accept the kindness of others in return dictate the future.

In the conclusion of the story, David Clement-Davies leaves the reader with two final messages in an attempt to provide direction from which to break the cycle of violence and avoid an apocalyptic future. The first is when Larka speaks to one of her family, Kar, in a dream after her death, saying, “I did not escape the legend . . . for it was its own kind of trap, as Man’s freedom will be if he doesn’t learn. But life is not a legend or a story. Reality is far more precious than a story. And to love one another we must begin to see one another properly” (Clement-Davies 547). In this passage, Larka seems to be saying that by pursuing the prophecy, whether with the intent to fulfill it or in fearful desperation to stop it, she became entrapped by it. This moment seems to convey that, by the wolves allowing

themselves to get trapped within these stories and fearful predictions of the future, they had allowed themselves only one path forward, one that would lead to the death and destruction they feared and yet were trying so desperately to avoid. The only way out was to learn compassion and to start viewing each other in a way that promotes understanding instead of fear. Only then could they escape the trap of these apocalyptic stories repeating themselves time and time again, and all of it began with the final message: that the stories people tell now will influence the future.

After Larka appears in the dream, Kar begins to view the world in a different way, and through that new worldview, he learns to heal the sorrow and pain within himself. The final pages of the story end with the telling of stories and legends to a new generation of young wolves, but as the young ones ask to be told the stories that had contributed to the widespread fear and ignorance surrounding the prophecy, Kar pauses and thinks better of it. These were the stories that had bred hatred among the wolves and that had spurred on the violent conflicts of the novel, and so he tells them, “No . . . But I will tell you a better story” (Clement-Davies 464). He begins a story about the world at its very beginning, before there was life or conflict, and how its very existence was important and should be valued. He changes the stories from ones that spread fear to ones that encourage the new generation to look around them with wonder and to value all that they see in the world, both living and not.

I hold the belief that writers of post-apocalyptic fiction, like Kar, also have a responsibility to change the narratives they tell. Post-apocalyptic authors can continue to spread tales of fear and hatred, or they can change the focus. Like *The Sight*, they can still tell tales warning about dangers in our future, but like James Berger and David Clement-Davies both suggest, these stories need to be told without forgetting what has already happened. Berger’s conclusion to *After the End* emphasizes the need to “[m]ake the perception new, but recognize that damage is long-standing, symptomatic, haunting, and historical” (218) and that

[t]o see a world as post-apocalyptic is to recognize its formative catastrophes and their symptoms, and to identify the ideological sutures that hide the damages and repetitions. It is also, finally, to recognize and create narratives that work through these symptoms and return to the apocalyptic moments that traumatize and reveal. At that point, new—more healthy and more truthful—histories and futures may be possible. (219)

The message of *The Sight* is that the traumas of the past can’t be undone, but that this fact

doesn't mean it is ever too late to change course, to choose a different path and work towards making the future better. There is no changing what has already come to pass, but that doesn't mean that people have to keep making the same disastrous decisions.

Learning to value the diversity in the world, and teaching future generations to value it too, is the path that will help this world avoid the catastrophic futures so many fear. Individuals and cultures alike have to learn to show empathy towards others and to try to understand people who lead different lives or who have had different experiences than their own, because it is only by being shown empathy that others learn to do the same. Writers should tell apocalyptic stories, but they should also remember they aren't just writing about what they fear the future could become. They are writing a history that has already been, and with that in mind, they should remember that what they write now, the stories they pass on, will live on long beyond the memory of the actual writing. The ideas and themes presented in post-apocalyptic stories will be remembered even when future generations have never laid eyes on the pages of their origin. So ask yourself this as you build the stories of the future: what do you want the future to remember?

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Hope for Change in the Post-Apocalypse: Gender Roles in *The Last of Us*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the portrayal of gender in the post-apocalypse by looking at the post-apocalyptic video game The Last of Us. The paper uses scholarship on apocalypse, video games, and gender to show that while the game adheres to some gender stereotypes it ultimately represents progress in its representation of gender roles. The paper uses examples of the game's portrayal of its characters and its depiction of the consequences of violent masculinity in a zombie apocalypse to illustrate how a post-apocalyptic video game can take steps towards imagining new gender roles in the post-apocalypse.

Gender roles in post-apocalyptic literature often represent both progress and a return to traditional stereotypes. James Berger's *After the End* states that "the study of post-apocalypse is a study of what disappears and what remains, and of how the remainder has been transformed" (7). After the destruction of an apocalypse, traditional patriarchal systems that were present before the disaster routinely dominate the rebuilding process. Often in post-apocalyptic stories, gender roles are a reflection of the society that remains. While *The Last of Us*, a 2013 video game, does follow this formula to a certain extent, I will argue that it ultimately takes steps towards transforming what remains by imagining different gender roles in the post-apocalypse. While the majority of other post-apocalyptic narratives do not portray progress in gender roles, this game opens up a comparatively large space for gender equality. It exposes the consequences of a stereotypical view of masculinity while providing an opportunity to consider what a strong female character looks like in the post-apocalypse. If the Greek word that apocalypse comes from means a "lifting of the veil," this game uncovers gender stereotypes. It portrays a future where the present does not have to repeat itself, where breaking down gender norms is beneficial, and where there is opportunity for change.

The Last of Us is set in the aftermath of a virus that turns people into zombies, or "the infected." Individuals play as the protagonist, Joel, whose daughter has been killed—not by the infected but by the soldiers trying to keep order in the initial chaos. However, the main storyline doesn't start until Joel accepts a job to smuggle a girl, Ellie, out of the quarantine

zone to the capitol building for undefined reasons. As the game progresses, their relationship begins to change towards something more familial, and the reason for their journey is revealed: Ellie is immune to the virus and may hold the key to developing a vaccine against it. For this purpose, Joel ends up taking her all the way across the country, a journey in which they must fight and kill not only infected but healthy humans as well. Before I begin analyzing *The Last of Us*, I am going to examine what other critics have said about the gender dynamics in the game. In contrast to many other games in the post-apocalyptic video game industry, *The Last of Us* has received positive reviews. *The Guardian* calls it daring and brave, *IGN* compliments Ellie's personality and sense of wonder, and *The New York Times* praises the game's indirect characterization and moral ambiguity. However, the game is not wholly without criticism. *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, apart from bestowing compliments, also raise concerns over gender roles. *The Guardian* argues that while the story presents itself as developing equal representation of both genders, having the majority of the gameplay from Joel's perspective ensures that it is Joel's story told—not Ellie's. Keith Stuart of *The Guardian* says that Ellie and other characters like her are “effectively the Manic Pixie Dream Girls of dystopian gaming; they exist as testing boards for their male counterparts—strong yet vulnerable, belligerent yet loyal—they're there to provide the beats in the hero's journey from sociopath to rounded adult male” (Stuart). Chris Suellentrop of *The New York Times* criticizes the lack of opportunity to play as Ellie, saying the game casts her “in a secondary, subordinate role” (Suellentrop). There is some validity to their claims, as *The Last of Us* does indeed follow many of the same old tropes and ideas seen in other post-apocalyptic video games.

However, I argue that this post-apocalyptic game ultimately represents progress in its portrayal of gender roles because of Ellie's overall role in the game and because of its depiction of the consequences of violent masculinity in a zombie apocalypse. I will do this by providing an overview of gender roles in post-apocalyptic media and video games. Then I will analyze the game itself. To illustrate the show's more progressive gender dynamics, I will examine Ellie's role in the cover art of the game, the conceptualization of the story, and the portrayal of the consequences of Joel's violent actions.

Post-apocalyptic stories often portray gender roles as a return to traditional norms disguised as progress. By examining the characters of *The Last of Us*, it is evident how the post-apocalypse serves to reinforce traditional gender roles; however, this game also provides an opportunity for recognizing the consequences of such a portrayal. Additionally, there is hope for the portrayal of gender in video games, in general, because people have a

chance to play and understand different gender roles. This representation of gender allows people to better identify with characters. It allows different stories to be told and experienced. Ellie and Joel's story is not just one of survival in the post-apocalypse, but it is also a story of loss, comfort, family, and wonder. It is a story of a fierce, optimistic girl and a man learning to embrace hope in the face of the post-apocalypse. Their story makes the players themselves question gameplay in terms of gender roles, which could lead them to question their own views on gender. The post-apocalyptic setting opens up an awareness of possibilities of what could be: if something could change in the post-apocalypse, it could change in reality as well.

Often, post-apocalyptic fiction portrays gender roles as traditional. Keith Booker, who studies the history of dystopias written by women, finds that even in works written by feminists, there was mostly a return to traditional gender roles. The “major works of the genre have done relatively little to challenge conventional notions of gender roles. Despite giving frequent lip service to equality of the genders, literary dystopias (and utopias, for that matter) have typically been places where men are men and women are women, and in relatively conventional ways” (Booker 337). The authors that Booker studies find it difficult to imagine an equal society, and their utopian communities fall back into patriarchal structures. One would expect that everything should be equal in a society where everyone is just trying to survive; the apocalypse should level the playing field. However, power structures quickly arise again as conventional gender roles reassert their authority.

Fiction offers a way to explore our hopes and fears as a society. As scholar James Berger says in his book *After the End*, “The post-apocalypse in fiction provides an occasion to go ‘back to basics’ and to reveal what the writer considers to be truly of value” (8). Consequently, fiction created by society reflects the ideals and values that the society itself holds. This holds true in both literature and video games. It especially holds true in post-apocalyptic stories that promise the audience an eventual simplification out of the chaos of both the apocalypse and of current life. Because the superfluous is destroyed, only what is supposedly necessary remains.

In some post-apocalyptic stories, the men who write them value a complete destruction of female empowerment: “there is an important strand of apocalyptic imagining that seeks to destroy the world expressly in order to eliminate female sexuality. In the post-apocalypse, desire and fear find their true objects; we see what we most want and most abhor. And these objects frequently are the same object—some instrument of universal annihilation” (Berger 11). Females with agency and authority are deemed superfluous in this

model. Men both desire women sexually and fear a world where women would have any sort of power. Gender norms such as this one, combined with the apocalypse, cause views of females as being other and lesser in the post-apocalypse. Lina Rahm describes a study she conducted on members of an online forum who compared women in an apocalyptic situation to either threatening “mama bears” or victims who should be helped in exchange for sex. These members of the forum felt a moral obligation most of the time to help women but were full of a condescending patriarchal attitude. Rahm concludes that the way these forum members view women in the imagined apocalypse is a reflection of how they view women in real life (78). Just as post-apocalyptic literature can reveal what people value, even an imagined apocalypse can reveal people’s true ideals and opinions. As such, a game where one of the main characters is a strong female lead challenges the forum members’ view of individuals’ roles in the post-apocalypse. However, their view is not the only one that people hold.

The members of the forum’s ideas about gender roles were fairly outspoken. Others may not be as apparent in their distrust of female power but may view the apocalypse as a way to return to the “good old days.” Katherine Sugg compares the post-apocalypse with the traditionally male-dominated frontier myth or Western. The return of the frontier myth is reflected in many aspects of culture, for as mainstream culture progresses, men can sometimes feel lost. Jackson Katz, the author and presenter of *Tough Guise 2: Violence, Manhood, and American Culture*, says, “Again and again, at key moments in American history, you see men reacting to change in just this way—by retreating into a hyper-masculine fantasy world” (00:43:55-00:44:05). As society changes and threatens traditional male control, men hold onto the past even tighter.

Sugg also suggests that the post-apocalyptic frontier myth has roots in the recession and its impact on men and masculinity (797). While *The Last of Us* was released in 2013, it was developed for several years earlier, and a lasting consciousness of masculinity in the face of the economic recession could have certainly influenced the game. The apocalypse restores individual agency, as there is no government or larger society; all people have to care about are the effects of their individual choices. As men feel lack of control in real life, apocalyptic fiction gives them power. Katz says, “We’re witnessing a culture in retreat—a narrative that tells men that the best way to respond to change is not to adapt, but to reclaim traditional masculine control and dominance from the forces of feminization” (00:40:47-00:40:53). Men are facing what they deem to be an apocalyptic situation. However, the men who are embroiled with a fight for masculinity do not see after the end, where society has

been transformed. They simply see the destruction of masculine control and attempt to hold on to their control no matter what it takes.

In some ways this attempt to reclaim masculine control takes the form of destroying femininity completely. Other times, this desperate grasp for the past takes the form of violence, as some men feel that this is the only control they have left. Post-apocalyptic media enables violent scenarios to be more removed from the present day, thus facilitating the development of unchecked violent masculinity. Today's culture teaches men that masculinity is linked to violence and that they must reject emotions at all costs. Katz says, speaking for men,

We can't show any emotion except anger. We can't think too much or seem too intellectual. We can't back down when someone disrespects us. We have to show we're tough enough to inflict physical pain and take it in turn. We're supposed to be sexually aggressive with women. And then we're taught that if we step out of this box, we risk being seen as soft, weak, feminine, or gay. (00:14:25-00:14:45)

Video games and post-apocalyptic fiction allow for these norms to be reinforced. In many of these narratives, life is portrayed as the survival of the fittest. Characters must be the toughest to survive the story or game, and any weakness results in failure.

Other norms perpetuate the idea of sexual conquest through violence. Katz makes the point that violence is almost always perpetrated by men, but that gender and gender norms are never discussed when talking about the problem (00:02:56-00:06:00). The post-apocalypse is violent. It is hard to look at progress in gender when everything is wrapped up in bloodshed. Video games also have a reputation of being violent. However, violence has consequences, even if some narratives portray otherwise. George Gerbner, a scholar who studies fear, talks about the routine of violence or "happy" violence—violence that is portrayed without consequences. Violence is often a fundamental facet of storytelling; however, in current media, it is frequently portrayed not as a vehicle with emotions and grief attached but instead as a mode of release with no consequences for the perpetrator or for the victim (Gerbner 00:08:30-00:10:20). This happens often in video games, where violence is usually just a game mechanism and a way to progress the storyline without any focus on what the consequences would be—emotional or otherwise—for the characters. In video games, happy violence is especially potent because the interaction is entrusted more to the intended audience. Instead of just watching the action passively, the player actively controls the characters and feels the consequences, or lack thereof, of violence more intimately.

Video games do not just deal with violence, however. As stated previously, in post-

apocalyptic fiction there is often a return to traditional gender roles, and video games also often address these traditional gender roles: gender roles within video games and within the video game community are often critiqued as exclusionary and sexist. Looking at the video game industry overall shows how *The Last of Us* changes the conversation about gender, not only in the post-apocalypse, but also in video games and in post-apocalyptic video games. *The Last of Us* shows how video games can portray gender roles as something complicated and nuanced without relying solely on stereotypes. This game opens up different roles, not just for gender in the apocalypse but for gender in video games as well.

In an analysis of video game studies, Benjamin Paaßen et al. claim that while men and women play video games in almost equal numbers, the stereotype of the male gamer still exists (426). If women are acknowledged as players, they are scorned as being less legitimate or successful. Because of this stereotype, the video game industry is geared towards men. Therefore, many games involve heroic male protagonists and hyper-sexualized damsels in distress. The men who play these games also buy into the stereotype that games are just for men and therefore see any female presence as an invasion. The consequences of this system include: harsher environments for females, lack of good representation of female characters, and some games specified as “girl games” only (Benjamin Paaßen et al. 429). With these constraints there are few popular girl gamers: despite the number of girls playing, most of the celebrities of the gaming world are male. This only serves to perpetuate the stereotype of a male-dominated industry and removes motivation for change.

Now that I have examined gender norms in post-apocalyptic media and in video games, I will move on to analyze the gender politics of *The Last of Us*. I will discuss why, despite some retreading of clichés, this game represents progress. I will look at how Ellie’s portrayal in the cover art and within the story allows people to experience gender roles they might not otherwise understand. I will also look at how Joel’s interaction with others and how his choices point to the consequences of violent masculinity.

The Last of Us does fall into some of the same gender tropes as stories with stereotypical masculine leads. In *The Last of Us*, there is a complex system of military, smugglers, rebels called Fireflies, and those living outside the walls of the quarantine zones. These structures take on a patriarchal role in Joel and Ellie’s life while the characters are in the quarantine zone, but even in communities outside the walls that Joel and Ellie find, the gender roles fall right back into patriarchy. They almost always encounter male enemies, while women and children—for the most part—are presented as background characters or not mentioned at all. There also is a definite sense of the Western and frontier myth in *The*

Last of Us, as Ellie and Joel journey across the land, fighting against the wilderness and others to survive. They even ride a horse. Additionally, Joel definitely hits all of the hyper-masculine qualities in the face of the apocalypse. Joel uses the terminology of surviving. The player does not know much about the twenty-year gap between his daughter's death and the plot starting with Ellie, but a conversation with Joel's brother Tommy shows they did everything that they could to survive:

JOEL: For all those goddamn years I took care of us.

TOMMY: Took care? That's what you call it? I got nothing but nightmares from those years.

JOEL: You survived because of me.

TOMMY: It wasn't worth it. (*The Last of Us*, "Tommy's Dam")

Joel has used whatever violent means available to him to survive in the post-apocalypse but has somehow become less of what he was before. Joel has survived something horrible that is hard for anyone else to comprehend, which reflects Berger's claims that "the survivor has seen, and knows, what no one else could see and know" (48). To deal with his knowledge and pain, and because of his loss, Joel has retreated into a hyper-masculine shell that rejects any sort of emotion. The apocalypse has left him without control, and he attempts to compensate. He follows the cultural narrative that emotions are a weakness. This sentiment is also reinforced by others in the game. Joel is told that caring is a detriment and that it's better just to survive on his own. Bill, a slightly paranoid, antagonistic man they borrow a car from tells Joel to send Ellie "packing, let her find her own way. Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time I had someone I cared about. It was a partner. Somebody I had to look after. And in this world that sort of shit is good for one thing: Gettin' ya killed. So, you know what I did? I wisened the fuck up. And I realized it's gotta be just me" (*The Last of Us*, "Bill's Town"). However, Joel doesn't listen. He has already decided that he is going to look after Ellie and protect her. He rejects Bill's advice, as he struggles not to lose his protective masculine guise, a struggle that occurs because he has begun to care for Ellie.

Ellie, however, is not so sure that she wants protection. She is grateful for Joel's company but does not like the way that he sometimes dismisses her or his initial refusal to let her take an active part in their mutual protection. The post-apocalypse provides the perfect stage for a hyper-masculine hero to come in and constantly save the day. In any other game, the hero would have followed violent archetypes and come to restore everything to how it was before. The difference in this game, however, is Ellie.

First I am going to look at Ellie's portrayal on the cover of the game. Melinda Burgess

et al. did a study examining over two hundred video game covers to analyze the trends of gender representation, and they conclude that video game covers show prevailing patterns in the portrayal of gender in video games, most of them negative. The cover includes the characters the developers deem relevant to the game and establish a player's first impression of the game (Burgess et al. 421). For *The Last of Us*, it is a little complicated because there are two covers: one cover is for the PlayStation 3 version of the game, and the other is for the remastered PlayStation 4 version. Normally on video game covers, males are portrayed as violent, while females are sexualized or nonexistent. While Joel is ready for action with a gun in his hand on both covers, Ellie is actively holding a gun on the second cover. Neither of the covers show Ellie in a sexualized manner. She is not objectified or idealized but portrayed as an important character in her own right. Males are normally more prominent on covers, but Ellie is more the focus on the first cover. On the second cover, she is as important as Joel. While only the cover, it shows how the developers decided to market and present the game. It shows what they believe about the game, which is that Ellie is a strong character, equal or even more primary than Joel.

However, the covers are not the only place where there is a difference in gender portrayal. To demonstrate this, I will also look at Ellie's portrayal within the actual story. In *The Last of Us* there are cut scenes, which show emotion and character development, and gameplay, which involves both fighting enemies and secondary dialogue. In both the cut scenes and the gameplay, Ellie is portrayed as a strong, complex character. She has never been outside the quarantine walls before and is extremely curious about the world around her. She admits fears of being left alone. She cracks jokes and teases Joel. She is portrayed as having her own thoughts, feelings, and motivations. She is her own individual character who people really enjoy. This is not common in video games, as Burgess et al. also found that only 21.4% of characters in their game sample were female (424). Ellie opens up new opportunities for gender roles, proving that a game with a strong female leading character can be successful.

Within the story Ellie is also portrayed as important. However, there is criticism from both *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* about the lack of time with her as a playable character. Sullentrop in *The New York Times* claims that the game handles the female characters with "depressing sameness" (Sullentrop). Stuart in *The Guardian* says that "in terms of identification and raw experience, we're with Joel all the way" (Stuart). I think that it is important to address this criticism. Alessandro Gabbiadini et al., in a study about empathy, masculinity, and video games, found that in a story-based game such as *The Last of*

Us “the assigned role fosters a sense of ‘vicarious self-perception’” (11). Identifying vicariously through a character allows the player to more easily adopt their point of view. This means that play time is important. There is some validity to the criticism that *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* offer; however, there is more to the story.

Video games are also different than other forms of media because they are interactive. When someone takes control of a character, do they describe themselves as enacting the actions, or do they talk about the characters doing the action? In my experience, at least during the actual gameplay, people are more likely to say things such as “I just shot that guy” or “Oh no, I have to hide” than to describe the actions from a third person perspective. Because they view the game from the character’s point of view, the player begins to share the character’s feelings and goals. This means even the short time individuals get to play as Ellie allows them glimpses and insight into an experience of gender that they may not have had the opportunity to empathize with before.

At one point in the game, Ellie is almost a victim of sexual violence while looking for medicine for Joel, which will be discussed later in this paper. Gabbiadnini et al. claim that playing some video games “increases masculine beliefs and decreases empathy for female violence victims, especially for boys and young men who highly identified with the male game character” (10). Joel is the main playable character for the majority of the game and is highly identifiable with masculine self-identity. Gabbiadnini et al. also refer to sexual violence in video games, writing, “because they are forced to adopt the visual perspective of the perpetrator, it is difficult for players to put themselves in the shoes of the victim” (10). In contrast, when the sexual violence is shown in this game, players do not play from the perspective of the perpetrator, but from that of the victim.

A fire traps Ellie with a man, David, who is threatening sexual violence. The fire adds to the atmosphere of terror and may symbolize the power that David has over Ellie in that moment. However, Ellie is fairly collected as she determinedly tries to get the keys to the door for her escape from David. It is not until she is able to kill David as he tries to force himself on her that the player is really able feel the desperation of the scene. The player has no choice but to acknowledge the horror of what happened and what almost happened. They empathize with Ellie and feel the injustice of the situation. This perspective, combined with Ellie’s previous character development and her resolve to save Joel by finding medicine despite danger, open up new opportunities for gender role exploration. Many of the men who play these games would not have had the opportunity to identify with a female character in this way before, and the game sends a powerful message with that

identification. It forces them to look at themselves and their own attitudes and actions, which may otherwise have gone unchecked.

I will also discuss Ellie as a contrast to Joel. One could argue that violent masculinity is necessary in a post-apocalyptic world. Joel definitely agrees that violence is the only way to survive. He has built up reasoning and excuses for his violent actions in his head as a defense mechanism to justify what he has actually done. In the game, the player sees him kill indiscriminately, torture others for information, and smuggle things on a strictly need-to-know basis. He defends himself from his smuggling partner Tess as she says, “Really? Guess what, we’re shitty people, Joel. It’s been that way for a long time” by replying, “No, we are survivors!” (*The Last of Us*, “The Outskirts”). Joel justifies his violence as a means to survive and to protect others around him.

Violence may or may not be necessary in a post-apocalyptic situation, but Ellie serves as a reminder of the consequences when violence is highly tied to gender roles. Near the end of the game, Joel is injured, and the player gets to control Ellie. Throughout the game, Joel becomes a father figure for Ellie, but in this instance, she is his caretaker. Mark Pajor comments on the rise of fatherhood in popular video games and notes that the fathers are often made to prove their love for their child (or child surrogate) through violence. This is what he describes as parental masculinity, a type of masculinity that frames violence as existing for the sake of protection (Pajor 129). Joel’s entire storyline is defined by his desire to protect Ellie. He begins by behaving antagonistically towards her, or, at least indifferent, but comes to care about her. With that care comes his increasing desire to protect her however necessary. While the formation of this parental relationship makes for an interesting story told by the cut scenes and dialogue, it does take away some of Ellie’s agency and leaves her as somewhat of a plot device, at least in the combat gameplay. She is sometimes left to the side as Joel fights as the controllable character. Other times she does fight back, but it leads into a cut scene which has less impact on a player’s identifying vicariously with the character than gameplay does.

However, Pajor also looks at Ellie as a parental figure. While Joel is hurt, Ellie takes on the role of protector. She hunts for food and bargains for medicine with dangerous men, one of whom, David, seems reluctant to kill her. When the men ultimately chase her, she leads them purposefully away from Joel in an attempt to protect him. All of these things work to reduce the stereotype of Ellie as the damsel in distress. When Ellie is eventually captured by these men, she finds out that they have resorted to cannibalism and is almost raped by David. Pajor points out that the player alternates control between Joel and Ellie

at this point as Ellie temporarily escapes her trap by tricking David and as Joel struggles through the snow (140). This builds up the false expectation that Joel will arrive in the vital moment to save Ellie. It also builds a comparison of both Joel and Ellie. The game portrays them both as competent. Joel is able to struggle through the snow and search through the town, but Ellie also has the aptitude to escape repeatedly. Ellie turns a stereotype on its head by showing she does not need rescuing, and the game helps show this by portraying her as equal to Joel.

As this game compares Ellie and Joel, it also contrasts Joel and David. Both David and Joel believe that violence is inevitable in the post-apocalypse, illustrated in a conversation Ellie has with David while she is his prisoner:

DAVID: Oh . . . you're awfully quick to judgment. Considering you and your friend killed how many men?

ELLIE: They didn't give us a choice.

DAVID: And you think we have a choice? Is that it? You kill to survive . . . and so do we. We have to take care of our own. By any means necessary. (*The Last of Us*, "Lakeside Resort")

Both men fit the mentality of what Sugg calls "savage war" (804). In the post-apocalypse, leadership is tied with ruthlessness. Brutality proves someone is fit for leadership. Even Ellie is only recognized as able to hold her own after she kills a man attacking Joel; she does not initially kill within the storyline. It is only after her kill that Joel trusts her with a gun because her brutality has proven that she is capable of new responsibility and leadership. Joel and David are brutal and violent almost as a default, but Ellie has to prove herself. While Ellie's violence may be tied to protection and responsibility, David and Joel's is also tied to masculinity. Joel's blame is not absolved. Indeed, he only sighs when Ellie asks if he has killed a lot of innocent people. However, as the game shows Joel killing more and more people to rescue Ellie, David takes a different idea of any means necessary. A man calls Ellie David's "newest pet" (*The Last of Us*, "Lakeside Resort"). David's masculinity and leadership are tied to sexual conquest and to violence against Ellie. Both men are just trying to survive the apocalypse, but both have different ideas of what it means to just survive. Ellie fights back against David and against the idea that she is just an object to be used or a trophy to be won to prove someone's leadership or manhood.

If *The Last of Us* were playing into traditional gender tropes, Joel would heroically get there just in time to save Ellie. However, he gets there just as Ellie saves herself by killing David. Ellie is almost a victim of sexual violence perpetrated by someone who believes he

could find his masculinity in that act. Therefore, this post-apocalypse allows us to see the consequences of violent masculinity.

In another game, Joel would have been a hero, but here he does not get to fulfill this traditionally masculine role. Here he takes on the more feminine role of comforter. He takes on a parental role that is not violent. He stops, and he comforts Ellie. He holds her when she cries. He does not prove his masculinity through violence, but rather he proves his fatherhood through comfort.

In the game, violence has consequences. Michael Goerger, in a paper about ethics in gaming, argues that this is what makes *The Last of Us* as a game different from other violent video games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series, in which an individual plays as a violent criminal (104). While in *The Last of Us* there is almost always someone getting stabbed, shot, or strangled, individuals also see the consequences of the actions. Ellie, for instance, almost gets sick after she has to shoot someone holding Joel underwater. At another point, she kills someone and feels sick to her stomach. Joel has been hardened by years of violence. He has become deadened towards it to survive, but it affects his character. Ellie mourns the death of two brothers who momentarily join them even when Joel does not want to talk about it. The game even opens with the despair Joel feels after losing his daughter, her dying in his arms. In *The Last of Us*, there is grief felt over death. In *Grand Theft Auto*, everything is just treated trivially.

Within the story there are consequences, and then there are consequences from the perspective of the player. People may not always like the actions of the character with whom they are identifying. Some may not like Joel's two instances of torturing others for information about Ellie's whereabouts. Others may be uncomfortable at his callous acceptance of a double-crosser's death at the very beginning of the game. There are many occasions where a traditional male, heroic, violent act that Joel performs is not presented as the right thing to do but is questioned, in-game and by the player.

In the same way, the end of the game leaves us wondering about the consequences of traditional gender roles. Joel is the protector throughout the game, and this can take away Ellie's agency. However, at the end, he takes away the ultimate choice from Ellie—the choice to live or die. Ellie is the supposed key to finding a cure for the virus. However, when they finally reach the end of their journey, Joel finds out that the surgery they need to do will end up killing Ellie. With Ellie already unconscious, he decides that he must save her and shoots his way out of the building while carrying her. Later, Ellie asks about what had happened, but Joel lies and says that they stopped looking for a cure. Joel realizes that if given a choice,

Ellie probably would have sacrificed herself. However, he cannot let her make that decision. In the post-apocalypse, he reclaims his power as the masculine figure by taking away Ellie's power. He has come to care for her, but he also cannot give up his role as father and guardian. This decision at the end of the game is, at least in part, because of the consequences of gender norms. Joel still sees himself as a masculine protector and Ellie as needing protecting, as incapable of making the choice for herself.

They travel back to the settlement of Joel's brother Tommy. Ellie confronts Joel, telling him about all the people who she has lost to the virus. When she was bitten, she was not alone and had to watch her friend turn into one of the infected. As Joel tries to offer platitudes, Ellie demands of him, "Swear to me. Swear to me that everything you said about the Fireflies is true." There is a short pause here, and players can feel Joel's split second hesitation. Then he lies, "I swear." The pause is a lot longer now, and players can see Ellie's eyes move, searching Joel's face. The players know it is a lie, Joel knows it is a lie, and Ellie suspects it is a lie. Individuals see so many emotions playing out across her face. She finally says, "Okay" (*The Last of Us*, "Jackson"). Then the credits roll.

It is an unsettling ending. Joel lies to Ellie because he took away her decision. However, the game does not present Joel's actions as heroic. It leaves the ending morally ambiguous. As the player identifies with Joel, they are uncomfortable with Ellie demanding answers and are left wondering if they did the right thing. Lindsey Joyce, in an essay about the game, says that "responses to the game's ending have been mixed, but the ending has surprised the majority of players as it breaks convention by denying a 'happy' finish. In doing so, Naughty Dog reveals how broken the conventions and tropes used in the game were all along" (Joyce). In another game or another post-apocalyptic narrative, the male hero would have been presented as unquestionably right no matter what, always acting in the best interests of his inferior female companions. In the post-apocalypse especially, female lack of agency is portrayed as the default, and gender roles fall along conventional lines. In this game, however, gender roles are far more open to new imagination and interpretation because, here, Joel's motives and actions are questioned. Ellie as a female character has developed such an identity that the players feel uncomfortable not only with Joel taking away her agency but with him lying to her as well. Joel has shed his violent masculinity enough for us to understand his emotions and motives for his actions but not enough for him to avoid still being morally ambiguous. The game critiques toxic masculinity by showing the players how Joel's actions affect someone he cares about—Ellie.

The characters make their decisions in a post-apocalyptic society because, as Berger

states, “The end is never the end” (5). For a post-apocalyptic story to exist, there must be something remaining after the supposed apocalypse or end of the world. For Joel, the original apocalyptic event may not have been the viral outbreak but the death of his daughter. Joel faces the decision between a personal new beginning with Ellie or a new beginning for society. He could take Ellie, go back to Tommy’s settlement, and stick with the gender roles and norms that he knows. Or he could give up Ellie, whom he has come to love and care for, and face change. With his identity tied so strongly to first violent masculinity and then to protection, it is easier for him to choose to protect Ellie and in turn protect his own gender identity. However, the game does not present that choice as right or wrong but simply as a choice. This is how this post-apocalyptic game opens up gender roles.

The New York Times argues that Ellie’s lack of playtime is problematic (Suellentrop). While it may appear this way, I believe that the time we do get to play as her is one of the crucial reasons why this game represents progress in gender roles in the post-apocalypse. It is here where Ellie refuses objectification and where Joel first does not get to fulfill the role of violent masculine hero. Ellie fights back against sexual violence, and Joel does not use violence typical of a post-apocalyptic video game to help; rather, he uses empathy and comfort. *The Guardian* also criticizes Ellie’s lack of play time and says that she is simply a “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” (Stuart). While Ellie does help further Joel’s storyline, in doing so she develops into a full-fledged character in her own right. Part of the reason why the ending is so unsettling is because the player has come to care about Ellie as a character. The player knows her motivations and realizes that the choice that Joel makes for her is not one that she would want for herself. This strength of character makes the consequences of Joel’s choices even more evident. While *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* offer some valid criticism, the portrayal of Ellie and the game’s critique of Joel’s violent masculinity ultimately show progress in imagining new roles in the post-apocalypse.

The ambiguous ending leaves players questioning their own motives and choices in relation to the characters. Showing the character of Ellie and the consequences of Joel’s actions allow for new stories of gender roles to develop.

The post-apocalypse reflects values of our own world and is a reflection of the future. Ellie’s overall role in the game, as well as its portrayal of the consequences of violent masculinity, represents a step towards the imagining of new gender roles in the post-apocalypse and in the player’s real life. It allows the future to be one of hope for the strength that is found in equality.

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Oppression, Storytelling, and Resistance in Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

Using the scholarship of James Berger, David Hogsette, and other academics, this paper explores various contemporary issues seen throughout Bruce Miller's TV adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, The Handmaid's Tale. Investigating the Hulu series through the lens of post-apocalyptic and feminist theory, this paper examines the way that the series portrays female oppression, focuses on the power of storytelling in resistance struggles, and acts as a call for action to modern society to end the oppression of women. Examining the relevance of The Handmaid's Tale in the time of the #TimesUP and #MeToo Movements, the essay provides a new context in which to view women's oppression in modern society.

INTRODUCTION

Women's bodies have long been "the battlegrounds" on which and for which men fight, as Ketu Karak explains in his article, "'Stripping Women of Their Wombs': Active Witnessing of Performances of Violence" (43). As he goes on to say, women's rights, voices, and reproductive capabilities are commonly held hostage in times of social upset. This oppression of women, their bodies, and their rights proves no different in dystopian and apocalyptic representations of modern social upset and proves especially true in Bruce Miller's award-winning television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The post-apocalyptic narrative follows a young woman named June as she navigates the new and strange world that has taken the place of the United States of America. Nuclear contamination and widespread infertility plague this new nation, the Republic of Gilead, which results in a fertile womb becoming the most precious commodity. All women are enslaved, and those potentially capable of reproduction become known as Handmaids and begin new lives as "two-legged wombs" (Atwood 256).

In discussing Atwood's novel, David Hogsette sums up June's new world well when he says, "Women become nonpersons—individuals who lack the rights and opportunities that might enable them to counter openly society's construction of them . . . The Republic of Gilead defines Handmaids solely in terms of the condition of their ovaries, commodifying them as objectified livestock with the sole purpose of repopulating North America" (263-264). While Hogsette addresses the novel, I would extend his arguments to Bruce Miller's

TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* and argue that the modern adaptation gives voice to current feminist issues and dramatizes an unsettling future that most women find oddly familiar. Ultimately, Miller's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* is both a moving and cautionary one. Yet, while it models the familiar oppression of women and the battles for their bodies, I believe that Miller uses this platform to demonstrate the post-apocalyptic role feminine storytelling has in resistance and encourages audience members to take action against the kind of oppression seen in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

POST-APOCALYPTIC SIGNIFICANCE

I will first be discussing the ways Miller discusses female oppression and the role storytelling has in resisting such post-apocalyptic oppression. The first tactic Miller uses to display feminine oppression and the role of storytelling in resistance is by playing with the temporal reality his characters experience. The disorienting temporal frames the characters find themselves in serve to provide them with clearly defined “befores” and “afters.” They each clearly remember events before the onset of the post-apocalyptic world they now find themselves in. James Berger, in his book *After the End*, says,

The apocalypse as eschaton is just as importantly a vehicle for clearing away the world as it is and making possible the post-apocalyptic paradise or wasteland. Temporal sequence becomes confused. Apocalyptic writing takes us after the end, shows the signs prefiguring the end, the moment of obliteration, and the aftermath. The writer and reader must be in both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world and then paradoxically “remembering” the world as it was, as it is . . . Every action before the apocalypse is simultaneously an action after the apocalypse, and the event itself exists as a monstrous possibility made more or less likely by actions that, if it occurs, will never happen. (6)

The befores and afters of the characters in the show become confused and often intermingle, each interacting with the other. For example, June remembers specific moments of her before; moments such as attending a feminist rally, writing a college paper on date rape, and the birth of her daughter. While she sometimes is unable to differentiate between her before and her after, ultimately, these before moments provide the lens through which June sees, and can contextualize, her after moments. Further, June's after experiences give her context to understand her experiences in the before and how they brought her to her present situation. It is *because* June remembers what freedom felt like, what it was to hold a job, to exercise sexual agency, or be with her family in her before that

she establishes a lens through which she is able to find the courage for resistance in her after.

While her befores and afters may often get confused or impede upon each other, Miller ultimately uses this confused temporal sequencing to “take us after the end, show the signs prefiguring the end, the moment of obliteration, and the aftermath” (Berger 6). As Berger says, the writer, the reader, or, in our case, the audience, must also be in or understand one temporal time frame in order to understand the other, just as June does throughout the narrative. The audience must comprehend the befores of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in order to grasp the meaning and significance of the afters that they are seeing on the screen. This temporally confused post-apocalyptic world that Miller creates in his television adaptation is one in which the past often piggybacks on the present, while the present can only be understood by remembering the past. As Berger continues, “Everything after the end, in order to gain or borrow meaning, must point back, lead back to that time; and everything before that beginning (seen as the ‘beginning of the end’) reconfigures itself into prologue and premonition” (xi). Throughout *The Handmaid’s Tale*, June must recognize her clear before and her clear after and must use one to survive and resist the other. This temporal confusion is one way Miller uses elements of post-apocalyptic literature to further exemplify feminine oppression throughout *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

MILLER’S ADAPTATION

Now that I have discussed how Miller plays with the post-apocalyptic temporality of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I will touch on how Miller’s adaptation differs from Atwood’s original novel, as it makes room within June’s story for hope and resistance, another important element of post-apocalyptic literature. While Miller does utilize the temporal confusion common in post-apocalyptic literature, his television adaptation further contrasts Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel by showcasing a post-apocalyptic world in which there is hope for oppressed peoples and a space for those oppressed peoples to resist their oppressors. While the television adaptation brings Atwood’s characters to life, the space Miller creates for hope and resistance greatly differs from that within the 1985 novel. Miller elaborates on the story of June’s husband, Luke, and allows audience members to follow Luke as he travels to a refugee camp in Canada and continues to search for June and their daughter. Luke’s character serves to captivate much of June’s memory and provides audience members a tangible link to the time before Gilead, while providing glimpses of the hope and freedom that may be possible in the after. Luke’s survival and escape to Canada

gives audience members the sometimes unrealistic hope that June and Luke may be able to return to a time resembling the before or at least create a new after for their family.

Another hope-inducing addition to Miller's adaptation is the survival and ultimate escape of June's best friend, Moira, who not only escapes her bondage as a Handmaid but also life as an enslaved prostitute at a popular club and brothel called Jezebel's. While Margaret Atwood ambiguously ends Moira's narrative at Jezebel's and includes no such happy ending, Miller again gives audience members hope that the feminine resilience and grit we see in Moira can indeed deliver an enslaved character to freedom. One of the last obvious differences between Atwood's novel and Miller's television adaptation is in the storyline of another Handmaid, Ofglen. After she is discovered as a member of the resistance group in Gilead, Ofglen faces her end. Atwood mercifully ends Ofglen's life by suicide. However, Miller is not so kind and instead uses Ofglen's story to reiterate how women's bodies become the battleground in the fight for the future and how these women bear the cost of resisting their post-apocalyptic world of domination and oppression. When Ofglen is discovered to be a member of an underground resistance group, as well as a lesbian, she is tried and convicted of being a "gender traitor." She is then forced to witness the death of her lover and undergo a clitoridectomy before being sent back to the Republic of Gilead to resume her life as a Handmaid. After everything she goes through, Ofglen comes back to the Republic and continues to push back against her oppressors and remind those around her that there is still hope. Ofglen's character is the ultimate example of grit and resilience. Ultimately, Miller gives each character an ending with far more finality, but also uses their stories to promote resilience, grit, and hope. While Atwood leaves many endings up for discussion, Miller's adaptation inspires audience members to resist the unjust and remain hopeful that the future can change for the better.

CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP & RELEVANCE

Now that I have briefly discussed how Miller plays with temporal confusion—such as is common in post-apocalyptic writing—and how Miller's adaptation differs from Atwood's original novel, I will begin analyzing the scholarship on *The Handmaid's Tale*. While Atwood's novel has inspired much academic scholarship, there is no such scholarship on Miller's recent and award-winning adaptation of the novel. Thus, I will be taking the theories and comments on Atwood's novel and directly applying them to current feminist issues and Miller's modern dramatization of June's story. For example, Shirley Neuman, in her article, "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*," says,

“June, in short, is a fictional product of 1970s feminism, and she finds herself in a situation that is a fictional realization of the backlash against women’s rights that gathered force during the early 1980s” (858). While I agree with Neuman that Atwood’s original novel is a product of 1980’s feminism and women’s rights issues, I believe that the re-adaptation of June’s story and the creation of Miller’s television series is the timely result of modern feminism. It not only serves to reanimate Atwood’s original creation but also speaks to issues that twenty-first century women are currently confronting, such as social and sexual oppression. Miller’s adaptation also explores the role storytelling has in resisting such social and sexual oppression, just as storytelling has become an important part in resisting social and sexual oppression in modern feminist movements.

These modern movements have been gaining speed throughout the United States, such as the #MeToo and #TimesUP Movements. The frontrunners of the #MeToo Movement and those involved with the campaign to raise awareness and encourage solidarity against sexual violence and harassment were recently featured as *TIME* Magazine’s Persons of the Year. Millions of tweets and hashtags showed up just hours after the campaign’s worldwide relaunch. The movement included people from every demographic. Since then, the #TimesUP movement has swept through Hollywood, and hundreds have come forward with their narratives of sexual assault, harassment, and inequality in the workplace. For the men and women involved in these situations, there is a clear before and a clear after in which things will never be the same. Just as Berger says regarding apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic events, “Everything after the end, in order to gain or borrow meaning, must point back, lead back to that time; and everything before that beginning (seen as the ‘beginning of the end’) reconfigures itself into prologue and premonition” (xi). These survivors of sexual oppression have faced their own apocalypses yet seemingly have found support and the courage to resist by telling their stories. Much like the characters of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, they must also use their before to help create their afters. However, if we look at such media as Miller’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in which there is also a clear before and after, we understand that even though there may be a clear divide from which there is no going back, there is also room for hope, a chance to fight back, and a way to recreate an after. It is clear from even these few contemporary examples that Miller’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* speaks to current issues and provides audience members with the reassurance that, even though an apocalyptic event has occurred, there is still hope and room for resistance, as I will discuss later.

In addition to writings by James Berger regarding post-apocalyptic literature and the

genre's temporal confusion and ambiguity, I will be referencing work by such scholars as Elisabeth Hansot, David Hogsette, and Karen Magro. I will ultimately discuss how Bruce Miller's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* not only exemplifies the familiar oppression of women but also how it explores the role of post-apocalyptic storytelling in resistance and how it remains a powerful call for modern social reform.

OPPRESSION

While I have briefly touched on how Miller adopts pieces of apocalyptic theory, such as Berger's, to show oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale*, I will be taking a closer look at exactly how this feminine oppression is exemplified in the show. Like many post-apocalyptic work that seeks to draw a strong emotional response from audience members, *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts very intense and disconcerting oppression. While this oppression is startling, upon further examination, it is not too different from what modern women are familiar with and experience on a daily basis. To repeat a quote from Hogsette: "Women become nonpersons—individuals who lack the rights and opportunities that might enable them to counter openly society's construction of them" (263). While this illustration of women may seem exclusive to the confines of Atwood's novel and Miller's adaptation, I would argue that this view of female oppression is also applicable to modern women. The fact that women are portrayed as such "nonpersons" in the narrative as well as in our current society is what, I believe, makes Miller's adaptation so relevant to today's society, as I will discuss later.

In Miller's adaptation, no woman is excused from the oppression enacted by the Republic of Gilead. Even the elite women of society and infertile wives of influential government officials are barred from reading, writing, or speaking out of turn. This is exactly, as Shirley Neuman describes, the ideal "post-feminism" woman of the 1980s: "[they should be] submissive and more abnegating than any wife this side of the Orient" (860). This is precisely how the women in Miller's Gilead are seen. Again, these parallels are what make Miller's adaptation so relevant. All women of Gilead are commodified based on the reproductive capabilities of their wombs. However, the Handmaids of Gilead are treated as slaves; they have absolutely no rights, no voice, and no freedoms. They are physically abused, sexually assaulted, and mentally manipulated. They are stripped of everything that previously defined them as human, separated from their innate "personhood," and "render[ed] non-human," all of which succeeds to make these incredible acts of oppression possible (Katrak 41).

In exploring how apocalypse intersects with this female oppression, I will be using James Berger's definition of apocalypse as events that function as "definitive historical divides, as ruptures, pivots, fulcrums separating what comes before from what comes after . . . All preceding history seems to lead up to and set the stage for such events, and all that follows emerges out of that central cataclysm" (5). According to this definition, the dystopian world presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* most definitely qualifies as an apocalypse, especially for any female character. Miller presents a clear before and a clear after in which June finds herself, which acts as a historical divide between the then and the now. Again, we see Miller playing with June and the audience's sense of post-apocalyptic temporal reality. Everything that came in the before allowed for the Republic of Gilead to emerge in the after. Both June and the audience must understand one to create a frame for the other.

For example, in the before, June was a book editor and was free to practice her literacy at any time. However, literacy and free thought were some of the first things to disappear in the after. Women are banned from and severely punished for reading in Gilead. Yet, June encounters several instances of literacy in the after: playing Scrabble with the Commander and reading the message scratched into her closet. In order to understand why June is so fascinated with and encouraged by these chances at literacy and reading, the audience must understand her before and the very literate world June experienced in the before. In order to understand the magnitude of the freedoms June experienced in the before, we must understand the oppression she, and every other woman of Gilead, is currently experiencing in the after. This is just one example of how Berger's theory of the before, after, and a dividing apocalyptic event play a role in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in June's narrative account.

STORYTELLING

Complementing June's interaction with literacy throughout her after, we see her exercising the storytelling skills she possesses by, quite obviously, telling her story to audience members. Despite the horrendous oppression and suffocating slavery she experiences, June finds a way to tell her story, and through her rebellious narrative acts, she retains her identity and her sense of hope. Identity and use of language are closely linked throughout June's tale. Handmaids are not allowed to read, write, or speak out of turn. They are given new names that signify their "masters" and to whom they belong. This lack of literacy and restricted speech keeps them within the realm of Gilead-acceptable identities

and does not give them the power to recreate their own identities. Regarding Atwood's novel, David Hogsette says, "[*The Handmaid's Tale*] examines the political, social, and sexual dimensions of discourse, focusing specifically on oppression enforced by institutionalized control of acquiring knowledge and using language and on the self-liberating potential of an individual's act of storytelling" (263). Applying this scholarship to Miller's television adaptation, we clearly see the control of literacy and language, as discussed previously. Throughout the show, we see June navigate the political, social, and sexual "dimensions of discourse," yet she lacks the language to participate fully and establish her identity as a participant in such discourse (Hogsette 263). By restricting the language use of women, Gilead ultimately silences and excludes them from almost all social dialogue.

This repression of language serves only to make the language and storytelling that is available even *more* powerful *because* it is so controlled. In Episode Four, June finds the words "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum" carved into her closet wall. "Don't let the bastards grind you down" has since become a war cry for many feminist issues and a running theme of June's story. She says, "There was an Offred before me. She helped me find my way out. She is dead. She is alive. She is me. We are Handmaids. Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum, bitches" ("Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum"). This act of storytelling by a former Offred simultaneously establishes her own identity and passes along the message that she existed, that she believed in the person who would come after her, and that she ultimately believed in the hope that her written resistance provides.

Like the woman who left the message in the closet, June and the other Handmaids find ways to tell their stories as well and, ultimately, find ways to retain or recreate their identities through their storytelling abilities. While it is obvious that June is eventually able to use her voice and tell her story, her act of storytelling throughout her experience serves to both remind June of her former identity and to help her create a new one. The act of storytelling is what I believe gives June the strength to resist. Throughout her experiences, she frequently flashes back to her past and tells herself, and her audiences, stories from her life before. We travel with her into memories from her past: the day her daughter was born, times with her best friend Moira, and conversations she had with her husband Luke. As Elisabeth Hansot says regarding the novel, "[These stories] reestablish some continuity with her discredited past and give amplitude to her impoverished present" (57). June's act of storytelling gives her a way to not only connect herself with her before, but provides a way for June to use her before to understand and resist her present self and the post-apocalyptic after in which she finds herself.

These memories are what help June revisit her previous identity as a wife, a mother, a friend, and a free person. They help her to form a new identity in the strange context of her present situation. Her memories and stories are how she remembers a time before and a time when things were different. They, along with her act of storytelling, are what bring her back to the realization that life can and should be different and that she does have the power to fight back. Addressing June's capacity to fight back against her oppression, scholar David Hogsette says,

[*The Handmaid's Tale*] demonstrates through June that women, able to take risks and tell their stories, may transcend their conditioning, establish their identity, joyfully reclaim their bodies, find their voices, and reconstruct social order . . . language use is both politically oppressive and, ultimately for June, self-liberating . . . Writing, or in her case speaking out, validates an individual's existence; it proves that writer-speaker was, at some point, or still may be, alive . . . Someone was present to write it . . . by creating her own text, her own narrative, June similarly creates and validates her existence, her humanity, and her vision of reality and preserves her experience for future audiences . . . (264, 269)

While this theory was written in regards to Atwood's novel, it is easily applicable to the television show, as well as to modern instances of oppression in which women used their linguistic and storytelling abilities to resist their oppressors.

Gilead thinks that by restricting women's uses of language and literature, it will be able to suppress their voices and their identities as well. However, it only strengthens the power of their stories and the power of the limited words they have access to. It also proves that they have hope in not only an audience to listen to their stories but also in a future in which such an audience would be free to hear their stories.

ACTION

June's narrative thus acts to both startle audience members and move them to recognize the similarities between Gilead and our current social climate. When Atwood originally penned June's story, it was seen as "a fictional product of 1970s feminism, [where June] finds herself in a situation that is a fictional realization of the backlash against women's rights that gathered force in the early 1980s" (Neuman 858). While I agree that this may have been the case of Atwood's novel, I would add that Miller's recent adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a product of twenty-first century feminism and ultimately serves as a cautionary tale and as a call to action for our current society. The show clearly depicts

many of the issues that second-wave feminists faced, yet the issues presented are all eerily familiar to women of the twenty-first century. It makes audience members wonder if any positive strides have been taken in women's rights in the past forty years. Shirley Neuman expands on what *The Handmaid's Tale* shows us about this time before, the time members of the Republic of Gilead use to condone their behavior. I believe that the things she mentions are the very issues that Miller's adaptation also strives to address. She says,

[the time before] also tells us that it was not safe for a woman to go for a run or into a laundromat at night, to open a door to a stranger, to help a stranded motorist; that women didn't walk in certain places, locked doors and windows, drew curtains, left lights on as precautions or perhaps "prayers"; that women needed to "take back the night" and to replace kitchen table abortions with legal freedom of choice; that date rape was common enough to be an accepted subject for a term paper; that pornography . . . was a fact of life; that women were "found" . . . in ditches or forests or refrigerators in abandoned rented rooms . . . ; that one did not allow one's children to walk alone to school because too many disappeared; that less terminally lethal circumstances included singles bars, blind dates, the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't as well as a dedication to anorexia, silicone implants, and cosmetic surgery as a means to realize "possibilities" proffered by fashion magazines; that fathers left without paying child support, mothers wound up on welfare, and the wretched little paychecks of women would have to stretch to unsubsidized daycare . . . (Neuman 866)

It is clear that these things are widely seen in both our current society and the time before Gilead. This causes me to wonder if our society, left unchecked, could, or maybe has, turned into a narrative like *The Handmaid's Tale*. LGBTQ and women's rights, poverty, literacy, sexual slavery, war, toxic pollution, political conflict, "sexual politics, a woman's decision to bear children, her access to power, and her ability to determine her own destiny" are all still issues at the forefront of our current political climate as Karen Magro discusses in her article, "Gender Matters: Revisiting Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Penelopiad* through the Lens of Social Justice" (20). Miller utilizes and manipulates Atwood's original story to draw attention to these issues, which we still need to address and solve or otherwise risk our world completely turning into one like the Republic of Gilead.

Perhaps the most frightening part of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that these eerily familiar changes didn't happen all at once. As June says, "When they slaughtered Congress, we didn't wake up. When they blamed terrorists and suspended the Constitution, we didn't

wake up then either . . . They said it would be temporary. Nothing changes instantaneously. In a gradually heating bathtub, you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" ("Late"). And, like a gradually heating bathtub, the United States depicted in the show only makes small changes at first. This should make us, as an audience and as committed members of society, jump up and call out these injustices that we see. In the beginning of Gilead, women slowly lose their rights, their jobs, their money, and their independence, and people don't say much about it. America's democracy is gradually taken over by a militaristic Christian government and almost all personal freedoms are eradicated. While this totalitarian way of life greatly contrasts with the democracy that Americans formerly prided themselves on, like June says, things changed slowly, but eventually things changed completely. Furthermore, we are currently seeing issues of women's rights and oppression in our current world, such as those that inspired the #MeToo and #TimesUP Movements. While there are so many uncanny similarities between our world and Gilead, *The Handmaid's Tale* shows us that there is a way to resist and that not only recognizing this oppression but sharing personal narratives of oppression is a large step in the direction of resistance and justice.

By showing this violence against women and this incredibly unjust society, Miller succeeds in "involve[ing] and affect[ing] audiences as active witnesses" and works to trigger a sense of social justice that "they take outside the theatre" (Katrak 31-32). Miller's adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* should not only serve to dramatize oppression against women, but it demonstrates the role storytelling has in fighting and surviving such oppression. Ultimately, it should motivate audience members to notice and take action against the oppression and human rights issues that we easily see in our own world.

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Featured Artist: Gabriella Marcarelli

New College of Florida

We are thrilled to share five pieces of art by the talented Gabriella Marcarelli, as well as her artistic rationale for her work.



"Treat"

In this post-apocalyptic world, Shih Tzus are apex predators, and humans are their main prey.

I think that post-apocalyptic narratives are often too antropocentric—sometimes even devoid of any living beings besides humans. As such they often also rely on cannibalism and murder to epitomize the status of morals in a new, lawless world. Shih Tzus have always been lawless creatures, though we see them as not the predator animals they are, but rather our adorable and lovable companions. There is absolutely an expected dissonance between seeing their cute, dopey faces covered in blood and human remains.



"People Food"



"Pallaqueras"

Often stories of the post-apocalypse center on a dilapidated American landscape that is void of life and morals. However, for these three pieces, I tried to imagine how the mining town of La Rinconada, Peru would look in a post-apocalyptic setting. The present-day, economic climate of Peru forces its citizens, mainly its indigenous citizens, to seek work in the inhumane and inhospitable gold mines of La Rinconada. Currently, the exploitation of miners and land at the hands of the gold industry has led this town to become nearly post-apocalyptic. So perhaps the death of the gold industry via the apocalypse would allow for a sort of rebirth; through a collective effort, the town could abandon the mines and foster plant life and agriculture to sustain themselves and live on for themselves and those lost to the apocalypse.



"Mamacha"



"El Despertar"

The Post is Female

by Megan Schillereff, *Ball State University*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the long-standing post-apocalyptic tradition of male posthuman representation throughout the timeline of the apocalyptic genre, from the time of the medieval knight up to the age of the modern superhero. As this paper argues, the gender dynamics in most posthuman fictions traditionally emphasizes male ability and female inability. Despite this, there is emerging contemporary young adult literature that is giving voice to the self-actualized—instead of the sexually awakened—female posthuman. In doing so, this young adult series explores the importance of representing the genders equally in terms of their ability to prevent apocalypse and fight to save their world.

Post-apocalyptic literature has shown time and time again that whenever a cataclysm is on the rise, a hero is never far behind. For most of history—and for most of apocalyptic literature—that hero has been male. However, recent additions to the post-apocalyptic genre have introduced female protagonists who help fight off the end of the world. One example of such an addition is the *Shatter Me* series by Tahereh Mafi, which features a female posthuman as the apocalypse-preventing hero. I am arguing that the *Shatter Me* books are important to apocalyptic literature because they take a traditionally male-dominated genre and give readers a strong and capable female posthuman, one who can help prevent apocalypse through her self-actualized powers. By doing this, these books show the up-and-coming generations that both men and women are equally endowed with the ability to right the wrongs in their world and prevent apocalypses.

To fully explain why having a female lead in these books is so important, I will be showing why and how a female protagonist is part of a shifting, posthuman gender dynamic within the apocalyptic genre. I will do this by first looking at the history of the apocalypse through a study of events that helped shape and mold our current definition of apocalypse into what it is today. I will outline the evolving definitions regarding apocalypse from the biblical connotation up through the modern idea of apocalypse.

The biblical idea of apocalypse had a tone of hope; it was to be a moment of reunion with providence. However, as wars and disease ravaged the globe, the meaning of apocalypse shifted until it was just definable as an end of the world. It is important to look at the historical evolution of the definition of apocalypse because of how it relates to gender

dynamics. In the beginning, the apocalypse was tied to religious ideas, and most religious texts—especially in the Western world—heavily favor males over females as the heroes of their tales. During the various wars men were fighting throughout history, the male dominance of the apocalyptic genre remained. Even as the idea of apocalypse evolved, men continued to be the ones who fought to change their world, while, historically, women were not often granted that same opportunity.

One source that reflects this example of a male-centered tradition of war and apocalypse is the Book of Revelation. Revelation is one of the oldest, and most canonized, examples of apocalypse that we have in the Western world. It is also a text full of gender dichotomies and violence. By looking at the far-reaching implications that these aspects of Revelation have had on contemporary society, the current impacts on our gendered worldview become exceedingly clear. If one of the most formative apocalyptic narratives of our time features only male protagonists as being capable of saving the world, is it a surprise that our contemporary literature still doesn't give true credence to capable female posthumans?

Secondly, I will examine the gendering of posthumans throughout history by looking at chronological examples of posthumans, dating from medieval times to the age of the superhero and up into contemporary literature. As defined by Mads Rosendahl Thomsen in his essay, "Posthuman Scale," a posthuman "constitute[s] a species developed from humanity" (32). A posthuman is a form of humanity that has been forced, most commonly by a cataclysmic event, to evolve beyond the limitations of their previous humanness. The existence of a posthuman is apocalyptic in nature because posthumans are a side effect of the apocalypse. The humans that survive the apocalyptic event become posthuman because they have adapted enough by evolving from their original form of humanity. As such, examining posthuman representation within the apocalyptic cannon is crucial because it shows the type of people society sees as capable and empowered.

Knights in shining armor (a male occupation) are one of the first functioning examples of a posthuman. They helped to protect their countries and kings from a myriad of apocalypse-like scenarios, both offensively and defensively. After the knights, the timeline then progresses into the representation and implementation of superheroes, also a traditionally male genre. Superheroes are probably one of the best examples of the posthuman in our media today, as they all are humans gifted with abilities that render them capable of saving their world.

The purpose behind discussing these points on the posthuman timeline is to

establish both chronological and historical examples of male representation as posthuman characters and to show that, while males have been presented as capable of preventing the apocalypse for centuries, it's only recently that female posthumans have entered the equation. Contemporary female posthuman representation within apocalyptic literature today is a bit of a gray area. Even though writers are employing females, they often only operate in roles of sex appeal, or they are reliant on a form of sexual awakening to become empowered. Both these scenarios are problematic applications of the female posthuman because showing female characters in this way creates a precedent where females can only function in an apocalyptic environment as a sexual body, not as a self-actualized, autonomous one.

This current view of the posthuman is why I will be taking a closer look at the importance of *Shatter Me*'s use of Juliette, a female posthuman. Juliette is a protagonist who achieves her true power and potential not through sexual awakening but rather through a moment of self-actualization, brought on by her grasping the true extent of her autonomy. While looking at *Shatter Me*, I will be addressing why Juliette is a crucial addendum to the post-apocalyptic tradition. She is a strong female character capable of changing her world, and she does it not by employing her sexuality but rather through a realization of self.

HISTORY OF THE APOCALYPSE

In order to discuss the gendered representation of the posthuman throughout history, I first need to explain some of the background of the apocalyptic genre. To grasp some of the history that has impacted our societal viewpoint of apocalypse, it is paramount to understand where these views originated and to look at the moment in time in which the apocalypse (in the current and modern understanding of the word) began to appear within literature. In her article "Apocalypse Not Quite: Romanticism and the Post-Human World," Olivia Murphey looks at the cultural moments that brought us to our current understanding about apocalypse. She opens her paper stating that "[t]he word *apocalypse* seems largely to have shrugged off its ancient meaning of 'revelation' and now stands in for any end-of-the-world scenario; the *Oxford English Dictionary* has, as its most recent definition, 'a disaster resulting in drastic, irreversible damage to human society or the environment, esp[ecially] on a global scale'" (245). As Murphey states, this current definition is not the only version of apocalypse to have ever existed; it is merely the most recent version of apocalypse to which our society subscribes.

The current definition comes from a few different moments in history. For example,

Murphey cites the Book of Revelation as having a cultural impact on the definition of apocalypse, as it is one of the most influential apocalyptic texts in the Western world. Additionally, the Book of Revelation has had undeniable influence on the gender roles of apocalypse, as it was one of the first canonized apocalyptic texts, and it features males as being the ones capable of impacting the apocalypse. Murphey then goes on to explain that it was around 1790, with “the unprecedented upheaval of the French Revolution,” that many mindsets shifted to the idea of “apocalyptic destruction” instead of the godly revelation they had all been previously hoping for (245). Generations of wars ravaged countries, plagues destroyed cities, and disasters kept happening, all leading up to the “gaining traction [of] the Nuclear Age” (Murphey 245). This combination of events had lasting impacts on how we currently view apocalypse. The seeds of the modern mentality regarding apocalypse were sown in the late eighteenth century, and the idea of the apocalypse as the disastrous end of the world became firmly cemented within the minds and fears of the general population with the onset of the nineteenth century. As Murphey explains, it was “after 1815, that our contemporary, negative definition of apocalypse was first theorized” (246). Yet, even as the definition of apocalypse shifted away from biblical connotation, the masculine tradition laid out in the Book of Revelation remained. Men continued to be the bodies able to fight for the change they wanted to see in their worlds, whereas women rarely had the same abilities.

The Book of Revelation is responsible for some of the most far-reaching impacts within the apocalyptic genre, especially in regards to society’s inherent gendering of who is perceived as capable of preventing apocalypse. Mary Wilson Carpenter introduces this argument in her article, “Representing Apocalypse: Sexual Politics and the Violence of Revelation,” saying, “I will argue that Revelation’s violence is a representation of a continuing power dynamic of gender and sexuality in Western culture” (110). Carpenter’s main question throughout the piece is “[w]hat were the effects of power generated by what was said [in Revelation]?” (110). I think the answer to Carpenter’s question can be clearly seen in the narratives about posthumans and apocalypse that we have been telling each other throughout time.

This is a key point of my argument, that the stories we’ve been telling ourselves for millennia all look eerily similar in regard to their long-standing male traditions, whether it be a knight in shining armor, a superhero, or—in the case of Revelation—angels. All these heroes share two common traits: their masculinity and their ability to save the world. Given the social impact that Revelation has had on our world, it’s not surprising that Carpenter questioned whether a female apocalypse was a “textual/ sexual impossibility given . . . the

culture” (111). The influence that the Book of Revelation has had on apocalyptic gender roles cannot be overlooked; this discourse has shown that the gender politics coined in Revelation have been carried-out through our society. Evidence of this can be seen both in the way we talk about the apocalypse and the way we talk about who has the power to prevent it.

THE TIMELINE OF THE POSTHUMAN

Now that I have shown some of the formative impacts within the apocalyptic genre, I can begin to discuss the character who is often endowed with the ability to save the world from apocalypse, the posthuman savior. To reach the ultimate goal of discussing why Juliette is so impressive as a female posthuman protagonist, I am first going to outline the gender timeline of the posthuman character within post-apocalyptic literature so that the masculine history of the genre is visible. To fully grasp the relevance of the posthuman, we must first understand what a posthuman is.

To restate the explanation offered in the beginning of the paper, a posthuman is any human who has progressed and evolved in their humanity to a point where they are no longer like the original form of humanity. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen explains in his essay on posthuman scale that “[a] very simple classification would be that posthumans constitute a species developed from humanity” (32). While he lists several different classifications that could be used to identify a posthuman, such as lifespan or size, he notes that the basic identification of a posthuman will be their normalcy—or lack thereof. As he explains, “humans have a strong sense of normality . . . it is clear that . . . what is normal and what is not . . . [will] determine whether a new era has arrived that can no longer be called human but should be called posthuman instead” (32). With that working definition of posthumanism, we can begin to look at one of the earliest examples of operating posthuman bodies: medieval knights in armor.

Raymund Papica introduces this example of one of the first posthumans in his article, “The Armor Network: Medieval Prostheses and Degenerative Posthuman Bodies.” In this work, Papica presents “the armored knight, as a representation of the hyper masculine chivalric ideal” (1). Papica sets up the connection between the inherent masculinity of the posthuman as he goes on to explain the link between knights and posthumans, stating that “the concept of the posthuman . . . finds its beginnings in the premodern period, and specifically, in the nexus of knight and armor” (2). The concept of knights as some of the first posthumans can be easily seen by looking back to Thomsen’s definition of the posthuman: a human who exists outside the realm of the human “normal.” Knights were far

from normal in comparison to most of the plebeian humanity of the medieval era. They were supposed to be morally, and physically, superior to their fellow man.

Their elevated morality can be seen in the code of chivalry that they were expected to uphold, a code that operated outside the norm, as it wasn't a lifestyle ascribed to by the majority of the population; and their physical superiority can be seen by their use of armor. Papica's support for the idea that knights are posthumans consists of the fact that they use metal armor to improve their humanity. They are one of the first examples of humans using technology to upgrade their bodies. As he explains, "the trope of armor [can] trace and unravel the intersecting relationships between the . . . posthuman body . . . [By] reading armor . . . [as a] posthuman body" (9). By wearing armor to enhance and improve their bodies—and by extension, their humanity—knights became some of the first posthumans. Knights used their armor to advance themselves above and beyond the "normal" realms of their fellow humans and, in doing so, cemented their place as one of the first examples of posthumans operating within our world.

The idea of knights in shining armor as the first posthumans helps to make clear the connection to the male tradition of the posthuman. However, the reign of the knight didn't come to an end in the medieval ages; rather it has been carried into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—in the form of a cyborg. Just as a knight was one of the first posthumans, it is also one of the earliest versions of a cyborg. As Steve Dixon, a professor at University of Salford, UK, explains "cyborgian performances include human bodies and metal prostheses" (Papica 4). So, arguably, where there is a human body using metal or technology as an enhancement, there is a type of cyborg.

Today, cyborgs are most commonly seen in superhero culture. In a similar way to how cyborgs are comparable to the modern version of knights in shining armor, superheroes are one of the best versions of posthumans that can be seen in our world today, metahumans who have progressed beyond the previous bounds of humanity to become something more: normally they complete this evolution as an answer to a cultural need of that era. Scott Jeffery addresses this connection between the posthuman and the superhuman in his book, *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics: Human, Superhuman, Transhuman, Post/Human*. Within this book, Jeffery gives his own working definition of a posthuman, saying that a posthuman "would almost certainly hinge upon just such a blurring of categorical boundaries, whether between the natural and the artificial, [or] the human and the machine" (11). This definition still works with Thomsen's idea of "normalcy:" a superhuman—by the very aspect of existing—is outside the realm of normalcy because of

their incredible physical abilities.

The blurring of boundaries and the existence outside the norm work hand-in-hand to show a more comprehensive picture of superheroes fitting as posthumans. Superheroes represent an important segment on the posthuman timeline because they serve as the answer to a societal need. In the same way that a posthuman protagonist is called into existence to prevent the apocalypse, the superhero is called into existence to help save their respective world or city from cataclysm, while at the same time they help to create “new conceptual spaces and metaphors adequate to our current . . . society” (Jeffery 12). In this way, they answer a cultural need by being an outlet for the expression of current societal emotions. This is identical to the function of a posthuman protagonist within apocalyptic literature, where the protagonist arises to help prevent the apocalypse. With the understanding that posthumans serve to answer a societal call, the danger of contemporary culture only acknowledging male bodies as capable of helping becomes ever clearer. If men are repeatedly represented as the majority of superheroes and posthumans, then we are reinforcing the mentality laid in Revelation that men are the only ones qualified to prevent apocalypse.

The male superhero body and the male posthuman body exist and operate in very similar ways; as such, it comes as no surprise that Jeffery also presents superheroes as a way to read the timeline of posthumans by following the male tradition, saying, “[I]n many respects this is what the history of the comic book posthuman offers; an unbroken chain of posthuman representations put to very different uses and given different meanings at certain times” (17). And, remaining true to the connection between posthumans and superheroes, Jeffery nods his hat to the male tradition within the superhero field, saying that “the comic book posthuman body still regularly manifests itself as a white, male, muscular body” (17). Just as the posthuman protagonist within apocalyptic literature is populated by a male majority, so too is the superhero field.

And while there have always been some female superheroes, it is only in recent years that they have evolved past the point of only existing as plot points in their male counterparts’ storylines. The same can be said of the female posthuman. It is only within recent years that post-apocalyptic literature has moved into a place where it has begun to incorporate female protagonists. However, this improvement doesn’t mean that they have been implemented flawlessly into the apocalyptic field. There are still some issues with the representation of the female posthumans, as the gendered view of apocalypse, dating all the way back to Revelation, continues to have impacts on the genre. In “Docile Bodies,

Dangerous Bodies: Sexual Awakening and Social Resistance in Young Adult Dystopian Novels,” Sara K. Day explores some of these contemporary issues surrounding female protagonists within apocalyptic stories, including the “problematic treatment of adolescent’s women’s sexual awakening as impetus for social resistance in dystopian novels for young adults” (76). It is a common occurrence within apocalyptic literature to feature a female protagonist, give her a love interest, and have her moment of empowerment be focused around her sexual awakening or around her sexual acceptance of said male love interest. Day is able to list several young adult novels that involve such a plot, including “Scott Westerfelds’s *Uglies*, Julianna Baggott’s *Pure . . .* Veronica Roth’s *Divergent*,” and she even notes it as a force at work in Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* (76). I would like to take a small step back to clarify that I am not here to argue that women shouldn’t be allowed sexual autonomy. However, I am arguing that sexual awakening shouldn’t repeatedly be sourced as the catalyst for a female character discovering her strength.

An awakening—of any kind—can be a very empowering moment. Restricting the moment of that awakening to a sexual encounter shows the gender corruption embedded within the apocalyptic genre. Day explains that “[b]y removing adolescent women to potential dystopian futures, authors complicate the question of sexual awakening as empowerment, as their novels both reflect contemporary Western culture and anticipate futures in which young women’s bodies continue to be treated as contested and contestable spaces” (79). By setting up female protagonists to receive their moment of empowerment through a sexual awakening, apocalyptic stories simultaneously create an environment where a female’s bodily autonomy is presented as possible, while—in the same breath—reminding women that their bodies are objects and spaces that can be up for debate and possession.

This problematic mentality is a situation that still permeates our contemporary representations of gender: if a female protagonist is only able to become fully actualized as a posthuman through a sexual awakening of some sort, then her powers don’t truly come from her own body but rather from the undercurrent of male necessity. As there is also a very limited amount of homosexual representation within the apocalyptic field, a female character is almost always reliant on a male counterpart to achieve her true potential as a posthuman. It’s easy to see how this is a problematic way of presenting female posthumans within the apocalyptic genre, as it creates a societal norm for women needing men to become empowered instead of creating a narrative where it is a norm for a female to become empowered through self-actualization.

SHATTER ME

By understanding the long male tradition of the posthuman, as well by looking at some of the problematic representations of female posthumans, we have arrived at the novels I am examining: *Shatter Me* and *Ignite Me*, by Taherah Mafi. Some may try to argue that my use of these books is hypocritical, as they feature a rather complex love story, but I am not focusing on Juliette's love interests. I am instead focusing on her moments of empowerment as a fully realized posthuman, moments that came separate from a sexual awakening. As I begin to discuss why Juliette is a such an important example of posthuman female representation, I am going to outline the plot of these books so the implementation and execution of Juliette as a posthuman character becomes visible.

As the book opens, we meet our protagonist, Juliette, who is locked away in an underground prison. She is being entrapped there by the dictatorial government power known as The Reestablishment, which has taken over her world. After explaining what her post-apocalyptic world looks like, Juliette begins to delve deeper into her particular form of posthumanism—her lethal touch. She explains,

I don't know when it started. I don't know why it started. I don't know anything about anything except for the screaming. My mother screaming when she realized she could no longer touch me. My father screaming when he realized what I'd done to my mother. My parents screaming when they'd lock me in my room and tell me I should be grateful . . . for their humane treatment of this thing that could not possibly be their daughter. (Mafi 25)

Her posthuman abilities seemingly came from nowhere. They were unprecedented and unforeseen, her powers simply manifesting as a symptom of the growing apocalyptic conditions within her world. Because of her powers, her parents saw her as a monster and grew to hate her.

Her parent's disdain of her grew along with their fear of her abilities. It's like Thomsen said: the posthuman exists outside the realm of the normal. Their daughter was no longer a normal human, so their fear turned into hate. They began to tell her that she "ruined their lives . . . stole their happiness . . . ruined everything" (Mafi 26). And then, the final straw that broke the camel's back: Juliette accidentally killed a young boy. She had been in a supermarket, where a young mother had her son on a leash. The child kept pulling at the leash and ended up falling and hurting himself. Juliette, feeling for this boy who was being neglected by his mother, went to pick him up, saying as she remembers the incident, "I thought my hands were helping" (Mafi 130). But instead, her touch killed him. After that,

her parents handed her over to The Reestablishment, which, after running her through multiple asylums and testing facilities, placed her in the prison. And while trapped there, Juliette's self-loathing and fear of herself continued to fester and grow.

Juliette's power is consistently presented back to her in such a negative light throughout the course of the book that there is almost no way for her to see her powers as anything but a curse. While she may not have started out seeing herself as a monster, it was said to her enough that she eventually began to believe it. And after killing a small boy—even accidentally—it is easy to see how she came to feel this way about her abilities. Her revulsion at her powers is part of the reason that it is so important for her awakening to be one of self-actualization instead of one that is derived from her sexuality. Juliette hates and fears her own self for so long: what better way for her to become truly empowered than to accept and find power within herself? Her perception of herself and her powers is what keeps her functioning at a lesser capacity; while she is subjected to the opinions and voices of outside forces, her true problems with her powers come from her own view of them, which is why her moment of empowerment needs to also come from within, not without.

Moving away from Juliette's internal struggle and circling back to the main plot line of the story, Juliette is given a cellmate—an old friend from her childhood, Adam. And then, a short while later, The Reestablishment comes, breaks her cell door down, and drags Juliette out of the prison to the main compound of Sector 45, which functions as the capital of The Reestablishment. Once in the capital, it is revealed that Adam is actually a soldier of The Reestablishment, and he was sent to her as a guinea pig to see whether or not she was insane. Juliette's mental status was a bit of a question mark; since she had lethal touch and had been locked away for years, they feared she might not be fit to be around other humans.

And so, when she didn't kill Adam, The Reestablishment ruled that she was stable enough to take in for experimentation. While in the compound, she meets the leader of Sector 45, Warner. Warner tells her his reasoning for dragging her out of the prison and bringing her to the surface. He wants her to be a weapon. He wants to use her to torture information out of people, saying, "Inflicting pain . . . is an incredibly efficient method of getting information out of anyone. And with you? . . . well it's cheap. Fast. Effective" (Mafi 134). Juliette rejects Warner, exclaiming, "You think that because I *can* inflict pain, that I should? . . . You think I'm a monster . . . I value human life a lot more than you do, Warner" (Mafi 136).

This facet of Juliette’s character is also important to her impending self-actualization. She doesn’t want to be a monster, she doesn’t want to be used, and she doesn’t want to be what *other* people want her to be. She wants to be her own person, not the monster her parents—or society—see her as and not the monster that she has grown to see within herself. Her desire to be more than the role that society has cast her in shows one of the defining moments that will carry her toward becoming a self-actualized posthuman.

This mentality didn’t really work with Warner’s plans, however, so he proceeds to manipulate her into several situations where she is forced to use her powers. The most drastic of these situations is when he brings her into a room where metal spikes pierce the floor, ceiling, and side walls every few seconds, and then he sends in a waddling toddler, wearing only a diaper. He watches from behind a concrete wall, lined with two-way glass, as Juliette becomes panicked that the baby could be impaled. Torn between the fear of touching him and the fear of him being injured or killed by a spike, Juliette finally scoops him off the floor and runs to perch on a safe spot of ground. The position Warner has placed her in begins to enrage her, as she just wants to be able to help this child, and yet she knows “it will never be possible” (Mafi 169). She becomes furious: “And suddenly the world shifts out of focus . . . I’m overcome by rage . . . I don’t even understand how my feet move in the next instant. I don’t understand my hands and what they’re doing or how they decided to fly forward . . . I only know . . . I want [Warner] to experience the same terror he just inflicted . . . I catapult through the concrete walls” (Mafi 169-170). In this moment, Juliette takes her first step in progressing beyond her old capabilities. And she does it through no sexual channels but all through the desire to not be the monster Warner was trying to force her to be.

She reacts in a way that Warner doesn’t anticipate: instead of panicking and shutting down, or letting the child die, she bursts through a concrete wall, grabs Warner, and forces him to end his sick test. In doing so, she not only exercises her own autonomous will over her body, but she also discovers a new facet of her powers: super strength. Seeing the small boy in danger reminds her of the boy she killed in the supermarket, and through her desire to not be like her past self, she is able to evolve to a new level in her posthuman powers. This is a part of her self-actualization; she doesn’t tap into her superpowers via a sexual awakening, but rather via a moment of strength in which she realizes she doesn’t want to be the monster people see her as.

With mounting pressure from Warner, Juliette decides she has to escape from The compound. Adam reenters the story here, apologizing to Juliette and promising he never

wanted to hurt her. Adam explains that he actually was a double agent, joining The Reestablishment. Together, they manage to make it to a hideout that Adam has been maintaining for years, where he helps keep his younger brother safe. The two are able to stay hidden for a short time before The Reestablishment comes knocking, and they have to flee again, taking Adam's little brother and another double agent with them.

The quartet makes it to an underground resistance cell known as Omega Point. It is revealed that the other double agent, Kenji, is a high-ranking member of Omega Point, and he was sent to work in Sector 45 as a spy on Warner. It is also revealed that Kenji is a posthuman, like Juliette, and that he has the power to turn himself invisible. Upon meeting with Castle, the leader of Omega Point, it is revealed to Juliette that about half of the residents of Omega Point "have some kind of gift" (Mafi 309), including Castle himself, who is capable of an "impossibly advanced level of psychokinesis" (Mafi 311). It is among the people of Omega Point that Juliette first begins to accept her powers as a gift and not a curse.

She is surrounded by other people like herself, and Castle tells her, "[Y]ou are not alone" (Mafi 309). For the first time in her life, she is not a monster or a killer: she is a posthuman surrounded by other posthumans. It is around this time that Castle reveals the purpose of Omega Point. Omega Point serves as the gathering place for some of the last people free of The Reestablishment's control, people who plan to fight back against The Reestablishment and regain power and a voice in their own world. Castle calls Omega Point "the only hope [their] civilization has left," showing how this underground community of rebels is lining up to be the new civilization of the post-apocalyptic world (Mafi 306).

Between the realization that she is not alone as a posthuman and the realization that standing against The Reestablishment is possible, Juliette decides to join Omega Point in their battle against The Reestablishment. She wants to fight to help right the wrongs in her world and to help prevent the apocalypse that The Reestablishment is bringing down on their heads. Through Castle, it is revealed that their world isn't as bad off as it looks. The Reestablishment is the true cause of many of the issues, hiding livestock and growing crops in secret, which they then refuse to share with the starving population. Castle confirms that the damage to the environment is "probably [their] only real problem" (Mafi 307). But everything else can be fixed with the overthrow of The Reestablishment. All this information just cements Juliette's decision to fight alongside Omega Point, and so she begins training.

It is through this training that she begins to unlock more and more facets of her

power. She learns that her lethal touch is really a highly concentrated field of energy around her skin and that when she projects that power outward, it can shape itself in the form of super strength, granting her the power to hurl rocks or to create earthquake-force tremors. It can even manifest as a bulletproof shield around her body. All of these powers are uncovered not through a sexual awakening but rather through her own desire to improve her body and grow stronger so that she can be a reckonable force in righting the wrongs of her world.

Additionally, in tandem with the growing range of her abilities, her acceptance of herself also grows. She begins to see her powers not as a monstrosity but as a strength. This metamorphosis of thought is captured perfectly on the back cover of the *Shatter Me* book, as it highlights contrasting thoughts that Juliette has along the course of the book: “I have a curse” becomes “I have a gift” (Mafi). “I am a monster” switches to “I’m more than human” (Mafi). The back of the book also says, “My touch is lethal/ My touch is power . . . I am their weapon/ I will fight back” (Mafi). These juxtaposed thoughts show the evolution of Juliette’s view about herself as she becomes actualized with her powers. Her mental image of herself switches from seeing herself as a monster to being more than human—a posthuman. This realization is directly linked to the empowerment she achieves through the actualization about the extent of her powers.

Here, we can circle back around to discussing Juliette’s place at the end of the posthuman timeline. We have reached a literary moment where a female posthuman character is in the process of achieving the full potential of her power not through a sexual awakening, but rather through a self-actualization of her own powers as an independent entity. As she discovers the true depths of her powers throughout the course of the books, she realizes that her touch’s power to suck away someone’s life force is no longer her only ability. She learns how to manifest her powers into super-strength and the ability to shield herself—and even others—from harm.

However, the true moment of her empowerment comes slightly later, in the book *Ignite Me*. This moment comes not when she realizes the depth of her abilities but rather when she realizes that she can turn her lethal touch off and on. Before, she only has the option of living in fear of human contact. Her interactions are regulated to posthumans who have the ability to mute or disable her power, or she has to wear a specialized suit that covers her from head to toe, for other people’s safety. She has always “assumed [she is] fated to this life, to an existence in which [her] hands—[her] skin—[will] always, always keep [her] from others” (Mafi 312). Her realization that she could turn her power off and on opens her

eyes to the fact that she is now fully realized as a posthuman. Her powers can no longer limit or constrict her life. She has the ability to control her powers, and with that ability she can never again be forced into a life she doesn't want. She exalts her discovery, saying, "I can do anything I want now. Be . . . anyone I want. And it'll be my choice" (Mafi 313). This moment is when she becomes truly self-actualized and secure as a posthuman. She isn't reliant on any outside force to empower her: she is completely self-fulfilling.

With this discovery fueling her on, she leads the attack against The Reestablishment and wins, not through the power of love or through a sexual awakening, but through the realization that she is in control of her own body and that she can live the life she wants to. Her powers cannot limit her autonomy as she is now in full control of her incredible physical abilities. She has become a fully realized posthuman.

In conclusion, after examining the long-standing masculine tradition within post-apocalyptic literature, the true value of the *Shatter Me* books can be seen. These books present a posthuman female capable of preventing apocalypse through becoming self-actualized, not sexually awakened. So, circling back to Mary Wilson Carpenter's question: is a female apocalypse a textual or sexual impossibility? I think it safe to say that, while there is a lengthy historical timeline saying it is improbable, it is no longer *impossible*. Women, both as protagonists and as people, gain more voice and representation every day.

Shatter Me's Juliette is by no means the only female, or the last female, to grace the pages of post-apocalyptic literature. Female representation on the apocalyptic timeline is increasing. A prime example of this shifting dynamic can be seen in young adult literature—like the *Shatter Me* series—which continues to employ female posthumans in their texts. These applications may not be without flaws, however, as some of these female posthumans continue to be represented problematically. In addition to that, many scholars worry that the apocalyptic genre is inherently structured to subjugate females. However, while that has been true for the majority of the apocalyptic tradition, characters like Juliette show that for every female protagonist who achieves empowerment through her own autonomy, we as a culture are able to take one step closer to a post-apocalyptic world where both males and females can see themselves being equally endowed with the power to change the world and prevent apocalypse.

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On Fungi, Future, and Feminism: An Ecofeminist Analysis of M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines M.R. Carey's fascinating zombie novel, The Girl with All the Gifts. While scholars question whether or not a female-oriented apocalypse narrative can exist, as the genre is essentially rooted in imbalanced gender dynamics of ancient texts, this paper uses an ecofeminist critique to posit that the zombie apocalypse represented by Carey is a challenge toward the patriarchal values running rampant in the genre. This ecofeminist critique, while superficially offering a comforting message about female empowerment, actually offers a serious warning in regards to the insidious patriarchal structures that facilitate apocalypses.

There is a sense in which the zombie-apocalypse genre feels well trodden. Scenes of crumbling cities, makeshift weapons, tenacious survivors, and hoards of rotting undead have journeyed deep into the cultural consciousness of the Western world; and, similar to the myths of ancient Greece, zombie narratives—and indeed apocalypse narratives in a broader sense—are often a conservative holdout in a relatively more progressive culture, particularly in relation to issues of gender. The patterns are old, beginning with some of the earliest apocalyptic texts in the Western world. Mary Wilson Carpenter, in her studies on the Book of Revelation, even asks whether or not a feminist apocalypse is a “textual/sexual impossibility given not only the existence but the canonized status” of Revelation and its patriarchal gender dynamics (111).

However, a new trend has risen in the zombie genre, one in which undead literature has begun to investigate its more conservative habits. One such investigative book is M.R. Carey's 2014 novel, *The Girl with All the Gifts*. Set in a post-apocalyptic world of military bases, wild anarchists, and a zombifying fungal infection, *The Girl with All the Gifts* has all the trappings of any other run-of-the-mill zombie-apocalypse novel. However, Carey's novel, as one cover declares, is “the most original thriller you will read all year,” firmly setting itself apart from other zombie-apocalypse novels; this separation is partly by virtue of its main character: not the stereotypical action hero, but rather a sweet little girl named Melanie who loves reading Greek myths, spending time with her teacher Miss Justineau, and eating human flesh. Melanie is a zombie, a “hungry,” though she doesn't know it at first, and after

the military base she lives on is attacked, she must travel with her beloved teacher Miss Justineau to safety, avoiding the lethal curiosity of the scientist Dr. Caldwell, struggling to control her cravings for flesh, and learning what it means to be a cognizant, human-like hungry in a world of animosity and distrust.

While one must recognize that the zombie genre has challenged these conservative values before (George Romero's hallmark 1968 movie *Night of the Living Dead* depends upon strong metaphors of racial unease and othering), Carey's novel creates an entire world in which conservative—specifically, patriarchal—values are constantly called into question. While this novel's subjects of post-apocalypse, zombie infection, and environmental disaster might at first seem hopelessly disparate in an analytical sense, my investigation reveals a common ground in which these large ideas can take root—ecofeminism. Carey's novel, in a way, is an attempt to craft a zombie narrative that breaks away from the conservative, patriarchal values running rampant in the genre, and it does this by way of a strong ecofeminist critique, ecofeminism here being the idea that the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are connected within patriarchal systems. While the outlook of the ecofeminist critique may not always be optimistic, it effectively serves as a refutation of and a warning against the patriarchal structures that brought the novel's world to the apocalypse.

PROGRESSIVE, CONSERVATIVE, ZOMBIE:

THE UNDEAD BODY POLITICK

To label M.R. Carey's book as an ecofeminist novel is a decision that may find little intellectual sympathy in the present cultural moment, for indeed the term "ecofeminist" itself has fallen out of grace in the eye of third-wave feminism. While the juncture of feminism and environmental studies certainly still continues into the postmodern age, ecofeminism by name has become the subject of much derision. As researcher and activist Greta Gaard claims, "After the charges of gender essentialism—accurately leveled at cultural feminism, a branch of thought in both feminist and ecofeminist theory—most feminists working on the intersections of feminism and the environment thought it better to rename their approach to distinguish it from essentialist feminists and thereby gain a wider audience" (27). It is this "gender essentialism" that vilifies ecofeminism with third-wave, postmodern feminism, as ecofeminism's history of ascribing a universal truth to the female sex—specifically, the idea that women inherently share a closer bond with nature than men—grates heavily against postmodernity's insistence upon subjective truth—specifically,

in feminism's case, the idea that each human being of any sex or gender is an individual with his/her/their own truth, a truth which cannot be covered under umbrella statements like "women inherently do this" or "men inherently do that."

Gaard recognizes this contention, and she condemns ecofeminism's former gender essentialism, saying that it "[discredits] ecofeminism's diversity of arguments and standpoints"(31) and "[marginalizes] feminism's relevance" (32). However, she also casts doubt upon thought that would condemn ecofeminism to obsolescence, saying that certain types of backlash to ecofeminism is "antifeminist" (41). Essentially, Gaard calls for a revitalization of ecofeminist thought, minus the gender essentialism, because "an intersectional ecological-feminist approach frames" contemporary issues of resource disparity, healthcare access, and many other forms of worldwide inequality "in such a way that people can recognize common cause across boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, species, age, ability, nation—and affords a basis for engaged theory, education, and activism" (44).

While such a discussion about ecofeminism might appear to be a digression from inquiries into *The Girl with All the Gifts*, it is through an ecofeminist approach that the book breaks away from the zombie genre's conservatism; therefore, to defend such a theory is to defend the validity of the novel's feminist approach to apocalypse. This paper does not operate under the gender essentialist assumption that all women share a connection to nature that is closer than that between nature and men, an assumption that Gaard firmly disapproves. Rather, this paper operates under the Gaard-approved and third-wave feminist-friendly assertion that, in patriarchies, the oppression of women and the oppression of nature share a common cause—the patriarchal habit of domination. This paper will call such a mentality ecofeminism.

Here, another aside must be made: while the zombie genre has conservative traditions, it would be a mistake to label it as a mouthpiece for any one ideology or political position. While conservative traditions are strong and most obvious, counter-currents do indeed run beneath the surface, as counter-cultures thrive beneath their oppressive mainstreams. This should not be surprising. According to Jeffery Jerome Cohen, a prominent scholar of monster theory, "the monstrous body is pure culture," existing "as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place" (4). The monster of the zombie is no different, except perhaps for the fact that the monstrous body of the zombie isn't only pure culture; it is an immensely broad reflection of pure culture. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz, in their introduction to *Generation Zombie*, claim that the zombie is

“a privileged object of cultural studies,” one with a “far more flexible metaphoricality” than other monsters of the Western world (12). Throughout its literary career, the zombie has been everything: a Haitian slave created by a witch doctor, a lurching night walker in capitalist America, a disease-stricken cannibal with super strength and speed, etc. The zombie exists in “low culture” forms like comics and in “high culture” forms like the Jane Austen-inspired *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009). The horrifying mob sameness of the zombie hoard in *Night of the Living Dead* can be a critique on communism or on capitalism, depending on the reading. In this vein, Boluk and Lenz affirm such a thematic universality by saying that zombies are used as “vehicles for expressing anxieties surrounding class, race, gender, and sexuality;” in other words, zombies have the honor of being locales of terror for just about everything (12).

The conservative nature of zombie literature becomes most apparent when the genre borrows conventions from its cousin and literary partner-in-crime—the well-loved tradition of post-apocalyptic narratives. The appearance of the zombie regularly, if not implicitly, occurs in tandem with themes of societal collapse and of civilization’s end, and civilization’s end is seldom associated with the type of world that upholds progressive ideals. Specifically, societal collapse often marks a return to patriarchal paradigms that social structures have presumably tamed heretofore. Violence and power are once again the measure of worth. Most importantly in the conversation about ecofeminism, “the problematic position of sex, and particularly of women’s sexuality, is an enduring feature of apocalyptic discourse” (Berger 11). James Berger, in his book *After the End*, even goes so far as to say that “there is an important strand of apocalyptic imagining that seeks to destroy the world expressly in order to eliminate female sexuality” (11). In this sense, Berger’s statements are reminiscent of Carpenter’s: both acknowledge the misogyny present in apocalyptic culture. It is this misogyny that *The Girl with All the Gifts* must face while establishing itself as an ecofeminist piece.

So why is it that zombie culture and post-apocalyptic narratives find so much common ground thematically? The easiest answer is that patterns found in the threat of an imagined, fictional zombie outbreak closely mirror patterns that would appear during a serious apocalyptic scenario. Zombies wreak havoc on the power of governmental systems, causing societal breakdown; zombies create unstable food lines; zombies drive rooted human beings out of their comfortable homes and into urban and natural wildernesses. How different are these zombie-related hazards from the dangers posed by real apocalyptic situations like civil war, foreign invasion, climate change, or epidemic?

The last threat of this list is perhaps the apocalyptic scenario most closely related to the narrative of zombie outbreak. While Boluk and Lenz profess that “the zombie threat did not always rely on anxiety generated by viral outbreak,” much of the undead literature in the past century has indeed reflected that anxiety (3). This fear becomes most blatant in more modern iterations of the zombie. As Boluk and Lenz say, “While lumbering, Romero-style zombies effectively tapped into mid-twentieth-century contagion paranoia, the apocalyptic terror of the living dead was replaced in films such as *28 Days Later* (2002) and *Resident Evil* (2002) with a more explicitly biological model of viral infection” (6). In other words, zombies that were once mere metaphors for plague became plague themselves, and with this evolution of zombie as supernatural to zombie as natural, the zombie-apocalypse narrative became readily positioned to question its more conservative values. The genre itself was primed for an ideological transformation—or, more thematically appropriate, an ideological mutation. *The Girl with All the Gifts*, with its heavy ecofeminist subtexts, stands inevitably as the culmination of these shifts and the offspring of this mutation.

BIOPUNK: THE ECOFEMINIST CONNECTION

How does a zombie plague begin? How does any apocalyptic plague begin? With human technology so advanced as to stifle the apocalyptic glory of our species’ old microbiological boogeymen, there seems to be only a few options left for the diligent authors of zombie and plague literatures: one, have the plague be an ancient or unfamiliar disease (risen perhaps from the melting permafrost in Siberia) to which our modern human bodies have absolutely no resistance; or two, have the plague be a vicious mutation of one of humanity’s familiar, formerly contained diseases.

It is with this second plague option that the ecofeminist tendencies of zombie literature become most apparent. It should come as no surprise that humanity has long used natural frameworks to inflict harm upon itself, and plague is a well-loved weapon of this tradition: invading Europeans gave smallpox blankets to indigenous peoples in order to weaken their societies, and medieval history shows examples of invading armies hurling severed heads over castle walls in order to inflict disease upon the besieged people. In modern times, however, the ability of humanity to manipulate the natural framework of disease has reached shocking and terrifying levels. With the advent of biotechnology, humanity now has the power to create its final, ultimate microbiological boogeyman: a plague strong and vicious enough to wipe out all human life on the Earth. Why humanity would do this to itself is a matter for philosophy, but it is an incontestable fact that such

apocalyptic power has been created and employed before, as evidenced by the United States' use of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Just as atomic technology became a twentieth-century bogey, so has biotechnology become a twenty-first-century bogey. It just has yet to be used—publicly, at least.

Zombie literature of recent years expertly taps into this anxiety toward biotechnology. In the chapter “9/11 and the Wasted Lives of Posthuman Zombies” in his book *Biopunk Dystopias*, Lars Schmeink claims that

whereas most zombies of the twentieth century were what Kevin Boon has termed either “zombie drones” (the Haitian zombie) or “zombie ghouls” (Romero’s creation), many new millennial zombies such as those discussed here fall into the category of the ‘bio zombie’ . . . who turn into zombies through some biological agent (virus, bacteria, disease, chemical) and are thus a variant of biopunk’s representation of genetics as potentially reality-changing scientific progress. (207)

Biopunk, in the sense that Schmeink uses the term, is a particular type of science fiction that imagines the world reworked under the premise of advances in biotechnology (just as biopunk’s cousin, steampunk, reimagines the world reworked under the premise of advances in Victorian-era steam technology). In the above excerpt, he clearly tracks the progression of the zombie from its more supernatural origins to its modern, scientifically based iteration. His chapter additionally discusses the films *Resident Evil* and *28 Days Later*, both of which have a genetically-engineered virus as the cause of zombiism; the fungal infection in *The Girl with All the Gifts* is also implicitly stated as having been genetically engineered. By labeling the modern zombie as biopunk, Schmeink acknowledges the zombie genre as a vessel for expressing anxieties about modern biotechnology; in essence, the zombie genre has become a troubled rumination on what happens when humanity manipulates nature and produces far-reaching, unintended consequences.

And, according to the ecofeminist premise described previously, where there is the manipulation of nature, there is the manipulation of women. Because of the modern zombie genre’s decision to make zombiism the result of genetically-engineered plagues, it has opened itself to the full range of ecofeminist criticism.

Under this context, it is easy to read ecofeminism into any zombie literature that uses genetically engineered plagues to explain the appearance of the zombie itself. Such a reading, however, doesn’t necessarily make any particular novel an ecofeminist text. What, then, sets *The Girl with All the Gifts* apart from other works within the genre? Essentially, it is not merely its conductivity for ecofeminist criticism that makes it an ecofeminist piece;

rather, it is the text's use of these ecofeminist themes that sets the book up for such a conversation.

**LET'S DESTROY THE WORLD,
OR HAPPY ECOFEMINISM**

Post-apocalyptic literature, including that of zombie apocalypse, has a longstanding custom of being demonstratively punitive; that is, writers of the genre often make examples of their imagined humanity by depicting the terror and sorrow that could be unleashed if a particular immoral societal bugaboo is allowed to snowball. “The study of the post apocalypse,” Berger says, “is a study of what disappears and what remains, and of how the remainder has been transformed” (7). Authors can make large statements about morality by choosing who or what survives the apocalypse. For example, in the Book of Revelation, what disappears is all that Christianity deems evil, and what remains are the beloved people of God; and this remainder has been transformed into perfect humanity, united forever in bliss with the Creator. While the Book of Revelation gathers a wide variation of opinions to itself, in one line of thinking, God destroys the world because humanity has become too evil to permit its further propagation; by this refinement through holy wrath, the text clearly shows what it perceives as evil and what it perceives as good.

So too can *The Girl with All the Gifts* be read as such a moral winnowing. For the beginning portion of the book, the action happens at a military base called Hotel Echo, where scientists are conducting experiments on highly-functioning child zombies—zombies here being called “hungries”—in order to find a cure that will save the human population. Melanie is one of these child hungries, living out her life in a predictable pattern of nights spent alone in her cell, her weekly feedings, and her daily classes, one of which is taught by her favorite teacher, who she loves with near-adoration—Miss Justineau. One eventful day, Dr. Caldwell, the lead scientist at the base, takes Melanie into her laboratory and intends to dissect her; while Miss Justineau is making an attempt to rescue Melanie from Dr. Caldwell, a group of anarchists called “junkers” attacks the military base, using hungries as a siege weapon. Melanie, Miss Justineau, Dr. Caldwell, experienced soldier Sergeant Parks, and young soldier Private Gallagher all survive the attack and start toward Beacon, a large military base where they hope to find safety. But to find safety, they must cross a wasteland of junkers and hungries. Under this plot framework, Carey begins to insert criticism on the militarized world that humanity has created for itself, a world that, while nominally necessary for survival, has not functioned in the wisest or the most humane ways. At first,

the critiques come very subtly. For example, while journeying through the wasteland, Sergeant Parks contemplates some of the ways in which authorities tried to contain the zombie during the early days of societal collapse:

In the first days and weeks after the Breakdown, the UK government, like a whole lot of others, thought they could contain the infection by locking down the civilian population. Not surprisingly, this didn't stop people running like rats when they saw what was happening. Thousands, maybe millions, tried to get out of London along the north-south arteries, the A1 and the M1. The authorities responded ruthlessly, first with military roadblocks and then with targeted airstrikes. (Carey 167)

While this is a fairly bleak recollection, Sergeant Parks' reflections don't offer much judgment; these, for him, seem to be sad but necessary measures the government took in an effort to contain the worst of the zombie plague. Not every character possesses the same mentality toward these actions, however; later in the novel, Miss Justineau, who has spent much of the novel defending Melanie's personhood to the rest of the survival party, unashamedly offers her opinions on the government's past actions:

They're moving now through a burn shadow, another artifact of the Breakdown. Before the government fell apart entirely, it passed a whole series of badly thought-out emergency orders, one of which involved chemical incendiaries sprayed from helicopter gunships to create cauterised [sic] zones that were guaranteed free from hungries. Uninfected civilians were warned in advance by sirens and looped messages, but a lot of them died anyway, because they weren't free to move when the choppers flew in. The hungries, though, they ran ahead of the flame-throwers like roaches when the light goes on . . . It's more than twenty years on, and still nothing grows here, not even the hardiest and most bad-ass of weeds. Nature's way of saying she's not stupid enough to be caught like that twice over . . . Parks hears [Melanie] asking Justineau what happened here. Justineau makes heavy weather of the question, even though it's an easy one. *We couldn't kill the hungries, so we killed ourselves. That was always our favourite [sic] party trick.* (Carey 239-240)

This passage, while long, offers much insight into how ecofeminist themes are being handled in Carey's novel. For one, Miss Justineau is completely disapproving of the violence that the military used in the early days of societal collapse; to her, it seems to be an extension of the suspicious, hateful tendencies that characterized human relationships on the societal level before the Breakdown. This militarized world is something she completely damns. Interestingly enough, it is not only the human that this militarized world has

destroyed in this passage: the violence has also destroyed wide swaths of nature, so that even weeds are no longer able to grow in these sites of destruction. While nature and humanity are often seen as separate entities, this passage delineates clear connections between the abolition of one and the abolition of the other.

Further ecofeminist themes are developed when Carey chooses to gender nature as female. The feminization of nature is something that ecofeminists have long found problematic, as Cynthia Belmont details in her article, “Ecofeminism and the Natural Disaster Heroine”: “Disaster films often envision nature as female, as a mother—in this case, not a loving one who deserves our love in return, but rather an alienated adversary in a battle of good and evil” (358). As such, disaster narratives in which nature is considered female can be interpreted as metaphors in which the female is hated, feared, and ultimately mastered. The most shockingly misogynistic disaster-narrative metaphor that Belmont describes is that of the destruction of the Earth-threatening asteroid (which is at one point gendered as female) in *Armageddon* (1998):

The asteroid is drilled and implanted with a phallic nuclear warhead (which is at one point mounted by a crew member who spent his last night on Earth in a strip joint and who says, upon being disciplined, “I just wanted to feel the power between my legs”), and the drilling scenes are characterized by passionate resistance on the part of the asteroid. In one scene, the men are struggling to bore into a composite of iron and a recalcitrant mystery-metal never seen on Earth; the asteroid protests by roaring angrily, howling like an animal in pain, shooting hot gas at them through vents as they plunge nearer the core, and showering them with flying debris once they reach it. The drillers’ victory is sweetened by the asteroid’s putting up a good fight. (360)

This scene—while easily characterized as noble on a literal level—is, when taken in the context of the asteroid as feminine, an alarming metaphor of rape. And what’s more, “nature is a ‘bitch’ because she is angry at us for attempting to master her” (Belmont 359).

The Girl with All the Gifts, while it seems to originally play into these misogynistic trends offered by the traditional natural-disaster narrative (for the zombie-plague narrative is essentially a natural-disaster narrative), turns the trope on its head. The militarized world, which rests upon that patriarchal habit of domination, and the zombie plague, which comes under the jurisdiction of feminized nature, are at war, and the female is winning. Not only is feminized nature slowly destroying the military complex; it is also pointing out the fundamental flaws of this patriarchal system by showing how quickly it turns to massacring

the innocent as soon as pressure is applied.

In this vein, the end of *The Girl with All the Gifts* is the most telling development in this particular ecofeminist reading. Upon having found a group of intelligent hungries like herself and having learned that these intelligent hungries were second generation, produced by the mating of first generation hungries, Melanie convinces Sergeant Parks to set the seedpods of the zombie fungus ablaze. The seedpods, which can only release their spores under the heat of flame, erupt, and humanity, in the sense of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, ends. Mother Nature wins.

Melanie's justification for this decision is telling: by releasing the fungus, she has sacrificed the current generation of humanity for the next generation—the intelligent hungries who will be produced by their zombified parents. This, in a paradoxical way, was the only way to save humanity. In her own words:

If you keep shooting [the hungries] and cutting them up into pieces and throwing them into pits, nobody will be left to make a new world. Your people and the junker people will keep killing each other, and you'll both kill the hungries wherever you find them, and in the end the world will be empty. This way is better . . . the children will grow up, and they won't be the old kind of people but they won't be hungries . . . They'll be the next people. The ones who make everything okay again. (399)

Melanie ushers in the next wave of humanity, and she has high hopes for a more peaceful, utopian world. The only way humanity has hope, in the end, is by abandoning patriarchal systems of militarized violence and by allowing feminized nature to win and have her way. We can further see the ecofeminist implications of this circumstance in the final scene of the novel: Miss Justineau, the only survivor from old humanity, comes before a classroom of formerly feral, intelligent child hungries—which Melanie has rounded up and which she now leads—and begins to teach the children the alphabet. With such an ending, *The Girl with All the Gifts* potentially marks itself as an incredibly empowering ecofeminist piece: women destroy the world's violent patriarchal structures, and women recreate the world's structures anew.

However, while it would be easy and pleasant to end the ecofeminist conversation on an empowering note, such a discussion does not take all angles into account, particularly where the main character, Melanie, is involved. Apart from being the protagonist, Melanie is arguably the most interesting person in the entire novel—an object of attraction and disgust, of affection and terror. And, sadly, once the character of Melanie is fully analyzed, the ecofeminist reading becomes less of an inspiration and more of a horror story.

**THE WORLD HAS ALREADY ENDED,
OR PESSIMISTIC ECOFEMINISM**

The study of Melanie's character best begins with a discussion about James Berger's conception of how time works in post-apocalyptic narratives. According to Berger, the genre is a place where "[t]emporal sequence becomes confused" (6). He goes on to say that "[a]pocalyptic writing takes us after the end, shows the signs prefiguring the end, the moment of obliteration, and the aftermath. The writer and the reader must be in both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world and then paradoxically 'remembering the world as it was, as it is'" (6). A great example of this temporality bending, Berger claims, is the *Terminator* movie series, in which "[e]very action before the apocalypse is simultaneously an action after the apocalypse" (6). When John Connor's father embarks on a mission from the future to save Sarah Connor, he makes love to her and conceives John Connor, without whom the human race is doomed. Such a situation clearly shows the dependency that the post-apocalypse has on the pre-apocalypse.

Berger's argument about the temporality of the post-apocalypse goes further, however: "The narrative logic of apocalyptic writing is that post-apocalypse precede [sic] the apocalypse. This is also the logic of prophecy. The events envisioned have already occurred, have as good as occurred. Once the prophecy is uttered, all the rest is post-apocalypse" (6). What this means in relation to this paper is that in many apocalyptic narratives the prophecy of the apocalypse, in a way, is the beginning of the post-apocalypse, for once the prophecy is uttered, the world is effectively destroyed. The prophecy sets the world on a certain trajectory, and though the actual death wrought by the apocalyptic event in question has not yet occurred, humanity is as hopeless as it will be after the apocalypse: the same panic, pain, and despondency exist on both sides of doomsday.

In perfect relation to Berger's theories are the writings of Rebekah Sheldon in her book *The Child to Come*. In the book, Sheldon claims that "the future is the provenance of the child," and that the child is "freighted with expectations and anxieties about the future" after having been "tethered to a future that can no longer be taken for granted" (3). Most tellingly, Sheldon calls the child a societal resource and analyzes the "figurative and literal uses to which we put her in an age riven between unprecedented technoscientific control and equally unprecedented ecological disaster" (2-3). Essentially, Sheldon emphasizes the massive symbolic currency that the image of the child possesses in discussions about science, the environment, and the future.

For an ecofeminist reading of Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*, both Berger and

Sheldon's theories are indispensable. If the child represents anxiety over the environmental conditions of the future, as Sheldon says, then in some ways the child is a prophecy. And if the prophecy has been spoken, then according to Berger, the events that the prophecy foretells have already occurred. This has far-reaching implications for *The Girl with All the Gifts*, in particular in the character of Melanie, a child zombie: she is a subconscious reflection of environmental dread, a prophecy of doom for humanity's future. With this in mind, the character of Melanie becomes a central point of interest for an ecofeminist critique of *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

It is hard to think of a way in which Melanie could be a more appropriate symbolic manifestation of environmental dread. While the earlier ecofeminist analysis of the text compared the zombie plague to feminized nature, there is another way of approaching the plague analytically—as a feminized nature invaded by patriarchal systems and manipulated for their own benefit. After all, this zombie plague was genetically engineered, and ecofeminist theory posits that the domination over nature is an extension of the patriarchal habits of domination existing in modern society. What, then, is the decision of Melanie in the end? What is the victory of nature over humanity? Instead of an empowering dissolution of patriarchal structures and establishment of female community, the victory of nature represents the sweeping power of these patriarchal structures: Melanie, who is infected by a patriarchally manipulated plague, unleashes the patriarchally manipulated plague onto the world, dooming the original, feminized nature—of which humanity is often unwillingly and unknowingly a part—to deep, permanent change. And this permanent change, while being presented hopefully on Melanie's part, is ambiguous at best. Yes, the second-generation hungries will continue humanity, but innumerable human lives have been lost because of it. And yes, the second-generation hungries will continue humanity, but what will the nature of this continuation be? Will these hungries reproduce? If so, what will the population eat, now that there are no more humans? Melanie eats wild animal flesh, but can there possibly be enough animal flesh to go around? Will these undead denizens be immortal? Immortality is, after all, a mixed bag.

This pessimistic narrative about patriarchally modified nature finds a parallel in the behaviors of women throughout the novel. The most obvious example of this comes from Dr. Caldwell, a female scientist who wants to kill Melanie and run experiments on her in order to find a cure for the zombie plague. To make Dr. Caldwell a female emphasizes two very important points: one, that men and patriarchy are not synonyms; and two, that women can be carriers of patriarchal habits just as easily as men. With this in mind, it is important once

more to turn attention back to the character of Melanie. In the beginning of the novel, the girl writes a story that expresses her willingness to fight and kill monsters to save Miss Justineau if the need arose; while fighting and killing monsters to save a loved one is admirable in a way, there are heavy patriarchal subtexts in such a narrative.

Such subtexts carry through to the end of the novel, where Melanie has become the leader of the group of second-generation hungries; she becomes this leader not through generosity or diplomacy, but rather through killing these hungries' former leader and scaring the rest of them into submission. Were these actions necessary? Perhaps, but that does not make them any less violent. Melanie has established her leadership through the same patriarchal habit of domination. Like Melanie brings the patriarchally manipulated zombie plague into the new world, so too does she carry certain habits of patriarchy with her, therefore casting the end's inspiring female leadership into serious doubt: perhaps the female leadership will resume patriarchal habits; it just won't be called patriarchy. Perhaps the evils of the old system will merely get a female paint job and continue on as usual.

What is Melanie, then, as a representative of cultural anxiety? As a character, she is lovable, but as a symbol, she is horrific. She is Berger's prophecy of post-apocalypse, and that prophecy is one which proclaims that humanity and nature both have already become too affected by unhealthy patriarchal habits to ever live in a world without them. She is Sheldon's future child, and that future is one with irreparable scarring inflicted by the manipulation of nature and by the forces of violence. Melanie is inconceivably durable radioactive waste. Melanie is the suspicion and fear that insists upon human competition instead of human cooperation. While Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* seems at first to have created an inspiring vision of a more progressive apocalypse, the experiment becomes a pessimistic rumination on whether or not such an apocalypse could potentially occur. However, even these pessimistic ruminations are important conversations in the novel's ecofeminist critique, as they serve as negative examples of our potential future world and offer a startling wake-up call.

THE GIRL WITH ALL THE GIFTS:

AN ECOFEMINIST CALL TO ACTION

To repeat a quote by Greta Gaard: "An intersectional ecological-feminist approach frames" contemporary issues of resource disparity, healthcare access, and many other forms of worldwide inequality "in such a way that people can recognize common cause across boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, species, age, ability, nation—and affords a basis

for engaged theory, education, and activism” (44).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a unified theory in any field of study. This is ridiculously true for the humanities. Finding connections between large ideas like race, class, gender, sexuality, species, age, ability, and nation would daunt even the most eager of scholars. The theory of ecofeminism, however, claims to perform this task. In the way Marxism posits that inequalities are an issue of class, ecofeminism claims that inequalities are an issue of patriarchy. There are certain groups that would label such mentality as so-called “feminazism.” Why denounce men as the cause of all the world’s problems?

However, patriarchy is not men, and men are not patriarchy, and this is not a blame game. Ecofeminism only finds a pattern of oppression, and ecofeminism “affords a basis for engaged theory, education, and activism” (Gaard 44). This is good news. But it comes with a heavy sense of responsibility: if such a unified theory about inequality exists, then scholars and activists must begin to use that theory for change.

And change is vital, as illustrated by *The Girl with All the Gifts*. While Carey’s novel begins as an experiment to create a more progressive apocalypse, its story is essentially a demonstration of how patriarchal constructs collapse in on themselves again, and again, and again, harming and killing human beings with every structural tremor. This is demonstrated through the character of Melanie, who represents a dire prophecy about what could happen to humanity if such constructs are not abolished. Under ecofeminist analysis, which superficially offers inspiration while really offering unease, the text becomes a severe warning about the dangers of the patriarchal habits of domination over both nature and women. For if the threats posed to modern civilization are to be overcome, they will not be overcome by domination. Rather, they will be overcome by collaboration: males working with females, and humanity working with nature.

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The Evolution of Modern Zombie Comedies

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ABSTRACT

Zombie comedies are a subgenre of a subgenre in the horror film industry, and their prevalence in recent film and television history is unprecedented. This essay explores the beginnings of zombie comedy movies, their evolution throughout the past decade, and the implications of this genre's new relevance and its politics. Included is an examination of a more recent Netflix Original television show, Santa Clarita Diet.

INTRODUCTION TO MODERN ZOMBIE COMEDIES

Zombie comedies are a subgenre of a subgenre of apocalyptic movies. They fit into the zombie apocalypse category for the most part, and yet they also feature a wildly different tone and subject than serious zombie movies. For example, compare *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *World War Z* (2013). *Shaun of the Dead* focuses on average people in modern British life and how they deal with a newly introduced apocalypse. *World War Z* is far more concerned with apocalypse on a global level, with settings all over the world.

The zombie genre most notably was introduced to popular culture by George Romero in 1968 with his movie *Night of the Living Dead*, but the genre has since transformed and had many additions. At the beginning of the genre's prominence, according to David Christopher in his article "Zombieland and the Inversion of the Subaltern Zombie," it was easily dismissed as a low form of entertainment, and through that dismissal the genre could "avoid the scrutiny of the cultural censor" (114). As such, this genre flourished in its ability to critique popular culture, consumerism, and patriarchy without being heavy-handed; these early non-blockbuster zombie movies made an art of metaphor and of tackling difficult subjects in an apocalyptic setting.

However, as time went on, a new subgenre of the zombie movie was born. Referred to by Kyle William Bishop as a "zomedy," the zombie comedy is most easily associated with the hit movies *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *Zombieland* (2009) (24). Even though these movies create a site from which to criticize the zombie genre, they have come down under a fire of condemnation for refusing to deal with the issues that original zombie movies examined. This subgenre makes fun of established zombie tropes but, as a whole, refuses to

contemplate the original critique of modern society that movies like *Night of the Living Dead* presented. In this vein of thought, the zomedy uses humor and comedy not to inspire genuine thought or add to the zombie genre but to succeed commercially with a wider audience.

This zomedy subgenre has flourished and continues to grow today, with new works appearing even as recently as 2017 with the Netflix original show *Santa Clarita Diet*. This more recent addition represents a possibly optimistic outlook for the potential of zombie comedies in the future, as it shows that zombie comedies, despite the original criticism they sustained, can be a powerful vessel for making political statements. They are allowed to stand on the base of Romero's previous work with *Night of the Living Dead* and expand the conversation in meaningful ways.

In this paper, I will provide an overview of opinions on several zombie comedies and on the way these zomedies deal with the original subject matter of zombie movies. While I acknowledge that the zombie comedy subgenre often departs from a place that allows for a critique of society to one of mindless comedy and insensitive violence, especially in blockbuster movies like *Shaun of the Dead* and *Zombieland*, I will use the example of *Santa Clarita Diet* to examine the ways that zombie comedy can be used for both comedy and as a serious form of satire.

DIFFERENT VIEWS ON ZOMBIE COMEDIES

Opinions on the value of zombie comedies vary wildly. Kyle Bishop argues in his paper, "Vacationing in *Zombieland*: The Classical Functions of the Modern Zombie," that movies like *Zombieland* "cleverly [challenge] audience expectations and [offer] viewers a glimpse of how the zomedy subgenre can function as a positive social force within both the comedy and horror traditions" (25). Bishop is convinced that the zombie comedy genre is one that is welcome and inviting to modern audiences and that, in addition, its effect is one of positivity and hopefulness. Rodger Payne says in his article, "Laughing off a Zombie Apocalypse: The Value of Comedic and Satirical Narratives," that "because these popular works infuse comedy into the horror genre, they work effectively as subversive satire, reflecting a critical rather than an entrenched understanding of fear and threats" (222). He claims that the zombie comedy is successful because of its criticism of the zombie genre in general, rather than just as a comedy or a zombie movie.

Recently, zombie movies give a different treatment of zombies than older movies. One of the reasons zombie films are so acutely horrific is the fact that the sickness is not

something that can be seen, at first. It silently occupies the body of our friends, neighbors, and family members and replaces them. In *Night of the Living Dead*, the horror that zombies inspire is that killing them is painful to the main characters because they still appear as human bodies. For the sake of future humanity, these dead bodies must be stopped. However, in a zombie comedy these figures become little more than “a narrative punching bag” (Kelly 86). For example, *Zombieland* takes particular enjoyment in the dispatching of zombies. It even features a “Zombie Kill of the Week.” In zombie comedies, the zombies aren’t “people” to the main characters; they are just something to be avoided and slaughtered en-masse when possible. Kelly writes that “not only is the zombie increasingly rendered as funny (a mindless fall guy for violence gags), it is positioned within narratives as a creature that is fun to kill” (85-86). Zombies aren’t a sight of fear for the protagonist characters of zombie comedies; rather, they fall more under the category of “object that must be destroyed.” There doesn’t seem to be much rumination beyond it. As Kelly puts it, “the zombie has transformed from a device for cultural contemplation to a figure which has become a focal point for bloody fun, a newly justified target of aggression” (84).

This trend is particularly ominous when considering what zombies really are. It isn’t hard to tell what inspired the sight of bodies rising from the dead. They are victims of a plague—regular humans who caught a sickness. Even within the context of the zombie comedies, zombies aren’t a coherent villain, as they have no consciousness; they are merely dead human bodies. It feels like “zombies in these films seem relatively easy to slay and do not consistently pose an existential threat” (Payne 220). At what point in watching *Zombieland* is the audience ever concerned for the lives of the main characters? They always have an arsenal of weapons and take enjoyment in a kind of zombie hunting.

Characters in *Shaun of the Dead* exhibit the same joy in killing zombies. For example, Shaun has a daydream where his stepfather Phillip gets infected and becomes a zombie. Shaun happily kills him outright, annoyed about the part Phillip has been playing in his life. This was just in a daydream, but in the reality of *Shaun of the Dead*, Shaun and his friend Ed make a kind of game out of killing zombies in their backyard, throwing records to attempt to hurt them. In this zombie comedy, “to kill a zombified body is not to kill a ‘person’ or ‘hurt anyone’.” Instead, it is simply enjoying an activity at an amusement park” (Payne 99). What does it mean that movies that depict human bodies being decimated in ridiculous and violent ways have become so popular? *Zombieland* is one of the most popular zombie comedies to date, and it is one of the movies guiltiest of using gratuitous violence against zombies. It also includes some intense coded politics about race, gender, and class, which I

will now discuss.

The only message *Zombieland* gives about race is evident in the complete absence of people of color in the movie. Christopher writes that not one person of color appears in this movie as either human or zombie (119). The exclusion of every race but white has to be intentional and plays into Christopher's theory that "*Zombieland* normalizes a number of patriarchal social constructs including capitalist consumerism, the heteronormative bourgeoisie, and whiteness" (118). In watching *Zombieland* critically for indicators of race, gender, and class, it is obvious that the only target consumers of the movie are white, middle class families. This movie's choices in lack of diversity are exclusionist. Its casting says that people of color aren't main characters, aren't side characters, and aren't even zombies. They don't have a role in this world.

In addition, *Zombieland* has some fairly strong politics about gender. The main character, Columbus, makes it clear from the beginning that his goal is to have a girl to bring home to his family. From the start, this positions all his potential female companions as a kind of trophy to have and show off. Many aspects of patriarchal structures are visible in the narrative. Another important character, Tallahassee, has a slogan that he yells as he goes to slay zombies: "Nut up or shut up" (*Zombieland* 00:20:02). Wichita and her sister Little Rock are underestimated at first by the male characters, using their femininity to rob Tallahassee and Columbus by surprise; this provides some hope that the movie might not be so patriarchally minded. However, by the end of the movie, the two female characters find themselves stuck motionless on an amusement park ride, reliant on the male protagonists to save them from approaching zombie hoards.

This patriarchal gender dynamic does not simply appear in *Zombieland*, either. Cady and Oates, authors of the article "Family Splatters," suggest that "[m]any female main characters in 21st century zombie movies embody physical strength and emotional toughness in the heat of a zombie attack, while happily coupling in domestic tranquility after the threat has passed" (322). This is particularly true of *Shaun of the Dead*, where Shaun's girlfriend Liz transfers seamlessly from badass zombie killer to domesticated housewife at the end of the movie. In *Zombieland*, Wichita loses her ability to defend herself when she teams up with Columbus and Tallahassee.

Generally, zombie comedies—up until recently—have focused on the heteronormative, white, middle class perspective while criticizing the standards of the zombie genre. They often center around familial structures and leave behind the valuable critiques on society that made the first zombie movies so popular. Is it possible that the

zombie comedy genre should be left for dead? Or is it possible for the zombie comedy to pull out of its conservative position and into something that is genuinely critical? In the next section, I will be analyzing a new zombie comedy—*Santa Clarita Diet*, a Netflix Original that began in 2017—to try to determine whether it fits the trend of previous zombie comedies.

MY ARGUMENT

Unlike *Zombieland* and *Shaun of the Dead*, *Santa Clarita Diet* takes a different approach to the zombie comedy. For example, one of the main characters is a zombie, but it doesn't seem as though an apocalypse has occurred (yet, at least). I will be looking for instances where the show seems to follow in the steps of the previous zombie comedies and where it deviates from them.

Santa Clarita Diet is a story about a family who lives in the suburbs. The main characters are Sheila, Joel, and Abby Hammond. Sheila and Joel are married forty-something real estate agents, and Abby is their fifteen-year-old daughter. In their neighborhood, they live at the end of a cul-de-sac and are sandwiched between the family of vigilant LA Sheriff Dan, and the family of Rick, a police officer from Santa Monica. Dan and Rick have a not-so-playful relationship, and the Hammonds watch as they constantly bicker about their respective organizations. These three families comprise the main characters of the series. The first episode sets the audience up for the rest of the season by showing Sheila's descent into an odd sickness that eventually kills her. Almost as soon as she is dead, she comes back to life with a few differences.

Zombie Sheila is definitely dead: her heart does not beat. However, she does eat. At the beginning, she eats raw beef, but after she has a taste of fresh humans, she can't seem to go back. In addition, it is established that she doesn't feel pain anymore, and injuries prove that she has merely black sludge crawling through her veins. However, the physical side effects of her zombie state are just the beginning.

Before being zombified, Sheila is a little timid about life. She says to herself, "Am I bold? No, I am not . . . I want to be 20% bolder. No, more, 80%. No, that's too much" ("So Then a Bat or a Monkey" 00:01:28-00:01:30). The zombie Sheila of the rest of the season is at least 80% bolder. Joel notices immediately that "[i]t's not just a physical thing, she's acting different" ("So Then a Bat or a Monkey" 00:12:50-00:12:54). At the beginning of the episode, it is noted that Sheila is a fan of romanticism and is not incredibly sexual. Zombie Sheila is very sexually demanding and especially requires oral sex from Joel twice. In addition, she

pursues spontaneous decisions, such as buying a Range Rover and going out drinking with her friends. It is interesting that Sheila can no longer feel pain but seems sensitive to enjoyment instead.

At the end of Episode One, Sheila gets sexually harassed by a co-worker named Gary. She repeats her lack of interest in him time after time. Eventually she pretends to give in, saying sarcastically, “Your unwillingness to take no for an answer has made me feel sexy and desirable” (“So Then a Bat or a Monkey” 00:26:00-00:26:15). Sheila goes to lick Gary’s fingers. Of course, she bites down instead, starting an intense gorefest full of streaming blood and death. The upbeat music in the background of Sheila’s mealtime just lends to the atmosphere of vengeance. Her murder of Gary does not feel like murder; it feels like a powerful move of revenge for his harassment. That is one of the questions the show repeatedly asks its audience: is it okay to kill someone if it seems like it is justified? Sheila’s main source of food throughout the show is criminals from wanted lists. Sheila and Joel get the information about her victims from their neighbor Dan, who thinks that it is Joel who is carrying out the murders. Dan tries to blackmail Sheila and Joel into killing people who are not actually criminals. Therefore, he eventually also meets a grisly end at Sheila’s teeth.

The basis of the show revolves around two goals: getting a meal for Sheila and finding a possible cure for her condition. There are subplots aplenty, including Sheila’s physical deterioration, Dan’s blackmailing of Joel, and Abby coming to terms with the death and undeath of her mother. In addition, we see Eric, Dan’s stepson, helping the Hammonds understand Sheila’s condition through pop culture knowledge of zombies. Eric grows throughout the series as a character—but not as a love interest of Abby’s, although they are the same age. It is refreshing to see a girl and boy just being friends and growing individually in a television show.

Undoubtedly, the set-up of *Santa Clarita Diet* is quite different from previous zombie comedies, as there is one glaring absence: the apocalypse. *Zombieland* is a complete apocalypse, with no remnant of structured civilization surviving. While *Shaun of the Dead* results in the world returning to a world almost identical to the one at the beginning, it also involves an apocalypse. In *Santa Clarita Diet*, the apocalypse is absolutely missing (though admittedly there is a potential for one if the series continues). In this story, we have zombie Sheila and another unfortunate person named Loki who Sheila tries and fails to eat, but the zombie plague hasn’t spread past those two. Additionally, nobody has tried to kill Sheila yet: is it possible that the apocalypse was what necessitated brutality against zombies in the two previously discussed zombie comedies?

At first glance, *Santa Clarita Diet* seems posed to be disappointingly conservative in regard to politics surrounding class, race, and gender, as the main characters are middle class and white. However, I found in my analyses that though *Santa Clarita Diet*'s premise is not so different from those of *Zombieland* and *Shaun of the Dead*, the way it handles issues of politics is wildly different. For example, Sheila is often the center of attention in the show, and her displays of strength and power could leave Joel feeling less "manly." Nevertheless, while it is often discussed that Joel is not a fan of the murders that Sheila commits, he proves himself committed to his relationship with Sheila. He never gets angry at her for her condition, but, rather, he works to understand it. He reaches out to scientists to try to find a cure for her, but when it seems impossible for her to return to her old self, he decides that he loves her enough to accept her for who she is.

In terms of race, although people of color are not the main characters, they are not invisible. The Hammonds' neighbors are people of color. Rick is a black man, and his wife Alondra is Asian-American. In fact, most of the characters in the show beyond the Hammonds are people of color. Just like in *Zombieland*, there is no outright discussion of race; however in *Santa Clarita Diet*, people of color play important roles and are visible. *Santa Clarita Diet* is successful in being a funny show that deals with important issues of morality. In addition, it poses a new and interesting perspective in the zombie genre. What does it mean to have a zombie with no apocalypse? It changes the circumstance dramatically and lets us consider what it means to slaughter zombies. Eric even asks the Hammonds, "I mean, we're the real so-called zombies, aren't we? Consuming everything we want without regard for consequences?" ("So Then a Bat or a Monkey" 00:16:00-00:16:15). *Santa Clarita Diet* allows for some critique of society without the plot getting dragged down or becoming too serious.

CONCLUSION

It is possible for zombie comedies to successfully critique society while still being funny. In the past, even though zombie comedies criticized the unquestioned conventions of zombie movies, they also displayed their potential for presenting lazy, sexist, and racist caricatures of life. However, if zombie comedies are utilized to be genuinely critical of both zombie movies and negative societal trends, they could be powerful tools. Maybe that hasn't happened yet, but *Santa Clarita Diet* is a good indicator of a possible motion in this direction. Hopefully in the upcoming years the success of *Santa Clarita Diet* will bring positive changes to the genre of zombie comedies.

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The Four Horsemen in Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the popularity of the Four Horsemen within media today by looking at the television shows Supernatural and Sleepy Hollow. These two examples of Four Horsemen portrayals allow viewers to imagine a hopeful victory over the apocalypse that other depictions of apocalyptic events don't allow for. This paper studies the history of the Book of Revelation and its depiction in popular culture to better understand the importance of these optimistic outcomes in which apocalypse is averted.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Revelation has always been a controversial text of the Bible. Many churches don't teach it, or they skim over it. In his book, *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, Billy Graham states, "Often in the history of the church the Book of Revelation has been neglected, misunderstood, or misinterpreted by far too many Christians" (18). Churches, while thoroughly examining much of the Bible, seem to ignore or put aside this specific book: throughout my research on this topic, I have talked to multiple churchgoers who do not know much about the Book of Revelation. So why does it play such a huge role in popular culture? I have encountered countless television shows, movies, books, and other forms of contemporary media that portray this biblical apocalypse in some way, and while Revelation has plenty to offer, much of the media focuses on only one of its key aspects: the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

In portrayals of the Four Horsemen, screenwriters often depict them as tangible people, who are a main, if not the sole, cause of the apocalypse. In these interpretations, the main characters tend to have to fight the Four Horsemen and defeat them to stop the apocalypse. I believe the Four Horsemen are not only popular due to the prevalence of Christianity in the United States but also due to the fact that they are represented as a power that can be defeated. In other media about the apocalypse, the cause of the apocalypse tends to be actions that are difficult to prevent, such as global warming or incurable diseases. In the shows I examine in this paper, the Four Horsemen offer a chance

for victory and a physical end to an apocalypse. In essence, popular depictions of Four Horsemen give our society a narrative hope that we need, which other forms of fictional apocalypse do not provide.

With much of our media being infused with negative stories about potentially apocalyptic terrors like nuclear war or climate change, this interpretation of the Four Horsemen creates optimism for our future. However, this may seem paradoxical, as our society doesn't want the events in the Book of Revelation to actually happen. It's something that frightens most people. Many churches don't focus on the book because it is such a negative text to study in comparison to many of the other books of the Bible, which offer a more positive message of forgiveness, hope, and joy. However, throughout time, various groups have read the Book of Revelation differently. Each denomination has their own insight into what the book is and how important it is to their followers. According to Robin Barnes, "Catholics generally accepted the book's canonicity but distrusted it, whereas Protestants were more actively devoted to defending it as a source of prophetic insight" (266). As we can see from these particular groups, the opinion on the Book of Revelation has always varied from one group to another. With these opinions being so different, it is easy to see the ways that different denominations may apply the Book of Revelation and the Four Horsemen to their lives and the world around them. These opinions on the Book of Revelation have not gone away and can be seen in the ways we address the book in our popular media today. However, contemporary media looks at the Book of Revelation from a different, more secular, perspective and with different expectations, both of which can facilitate a positive end to an apocalypse.

The actual Book of Revelation doesn't end with a seed of hope for our current world; rather, the book is filled with complete despair for the future of most of humanity. The current world we live in is completely destroyed, and the only hope left is in a place called New Jerusalem, a city where God has brought all of His faithful followers (*King James Version*, Rev. 21). There is so much destruction and despair in Revelation's apocalyptic world that it is not something that people would want to endure, and the focus of the text revolves closely around these horrors that humanity experiences. However, when Revelation's apocalypse is depicted within more secular shows like *Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow*, the focus is rather on preventing the destruction of our current world. With Christianity being so prevalent in American culture, it makes sense that shows like these would feature many depictions of and references from the Bible, but these portrayals of Revelation on television do not truly match those of the Bible, as these new portrayals, rather than stressing the terrors of an

apocalyptic future, suggest that we shouldn't take such a gloomy view of the future too seriously. As these shows' apocalyptic interpretations demonstrate, people seem to be pushing against the gloomy biblical idea of apocalypse, wanting to believe instead that there is a way to survive. The screenwriters for these shows seem to be critiquing the Book of Revelation and those that take it too seriously by creating fantastical stories for their characters to fight through, and one way in which these screenwriters accomplish this is by humanizing the Four Horsemen. In essence, popular media is giving us an outlet to imagine a way out of such a terrifying end by depicting the Four Horsemen as conquerable beings. By looking at the history of the Book of Revelation and at the ways pop culture affects our society, as well as at examples of the Four Horsemen from *Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow*, I will be discussing this hope for human victory and survival that these depictions of the Four Horsemen provide.

HISTORY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION AND THE FOUR HORSEMEN

When thinking about the Book of Revelation, it's important to note its origin and the origin of the Four Horsemen. According to Revelation itself, the book came about when John the Apostle recorded a vision given to him by God, upon which he sent the book to the seven churches of God (Graham 17-18). The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are introduced in Revelation 6:1-8, when the first four seals of the apocalypse are broken by the Lamb. The Four Horsemen each have their own significance and name: Famine, War, Pestilence or Conquest, and Death. The Four Horsemen ride out one-by-one as they are called by "the four living creatures" and as their respective seal is broken (*King James Version*, Rev. 6). The first Horseman carries a bow, wears a crown and is on a white horse; he is generally seen as Conquest, though some interpretations give him the name Pestilence. The second Horseman rides a red horse and represents War. The third rides a black horse and carries a pair of balances; he is given the name Famine. The final Horseman rides a pale horse and is given the name Death. This final Horseman is most popular within the television shows I analyze. In the Book of Revelation, there is no escape from the Four Horsemen. They are beings who cannot be stopped, and they will bring about the end of the world. However, in the television shows, they become physical beings who can be defeated in some way, the conquering of whom will stop the apocalypse from happening.

While the Four Horsemen have been around for a very long time, they gained popularity around the Reformation era in Europe (c. 1517 - 1648) due to their adaptability

to the times. According to Barnes, the Four Horsemen were “popularized by Durer and especially Lucas Cranach in Martin Luther’s German Bible” (263). One reason for their popularity is that the story of the Horsemen lends itself to much interpretation: people in the Reformation were able to take what the Four Horsemen represent and apply it to what was happening at that specific time. For example, some people of the Reformation believed that “[t]he white horse with its conquering rider stood for the Second Coming itself, and thus for the explosion of prophetic awareness and religious conflict sparked by the Reformation” (Barnes 263). Essentially, people during the Reformation Era believed that the Second Coming of Christ was upon them and that the white horse represented this event. Over time, the use of the Horsemen’s adaptability has not changed. Much of Graham’s book, which was written in 1985, is a call to action for Christians, and he uses the Four Horsemen as a way of explaining the things that will come if the world does not change. For example, when discussing the Horseman named War, Graham states:

This heavenly vision is God’s way of showing us our folly and warning us of its consequences. Just as Harry Truman would not obey the warnings before Mount St. Helens erupted, so all of mankind through history has refused to listen to the warnings of God. (122)

Graham uses current events in tandem with interpretations of heavenly wrath as a way of influencing change among his readers. These are easy links to make: when reading the Book of Revelation, it is hard not to draw connections to current world problems, such as nuclear threats, global warming, and many pressing issues. This adaptability of Revelation and of the Four Horsemen allows readers and writers to apply these beings into stories easily.

However, it is not just in religious contexts that the Four Horsemen display their remarkable adaptability. In today’s media, writers not only integrate the Four Horsemen into problems we are currently facing but also present them as conquerable forces. The Four Horsemen become physical beings with whom characters are able to interact and against whom they may eventually emerge victorious. The Four Horsemen in *Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow* have weaknesses—such as the ability to be injured by sunlight or the need for a ring to keep them in their physical form on Earth—that they don’t have within the original text of the Bible. These weaknesses give humans a way to stop them from destroying the world. Unlike other types of apocalyptic threats depicted within popular media—threats such as plagues, zombies, and climate change, against which human survivors are struggling and lonely—the popularized depictions of the Four Horsemen allows for a more hopeful representation of apocalypse. Other apocalypses cannot be easily defeated, and many of

them have become overwhelmingly real threats that our society could potentially face in the future. However, the Four Horsemen allow for a type of apocalypse that creates a more hopeful feeling in the end. In shows like *Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow*, the audience is better able to envision a future in which the apocalypse and the evil in the world have been stopped. We are given an opportunity to be more optimistic while watching the Four Horsemen's depictions in these shows than when we contemplate the frightening future the Bible provides us. With so much of our media obsessing over the horrors of our present world, this optimistic portrayal of the Four Horsemen offers viewers the chance to imagine a positive future, which creates the kind of hope our society needs. If viewers are shown the end to an apocalypse, this could potentially encourage them to have confidence in our world and to want to work to fix the problems we are facing. By giving us hope within a television show, the positive apocalyptic story of the defeat of the Four Horsemen has the potential to give us faith within our reality as well. In a society that obsesses over the myriad of awful potential futures we face, such a positive apocalyptic story is rare.

REVELATION AND POPULAR CULTURE

Popular culture is deeply influential to society. In his book *Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life*, William Romanowski recalls a time when he was on a trip in Philadelphia with a youth group just after the release of the first Rocky Balboa film. The students he was with were not as interested in the normal tourist sights but rather the places seen in the film. Romanowski states:

Most of all, they wanted to visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art. They were not, however, the least bit interested in the museum's striking Greek Revival architecture or the priceless collection of art housed inside. What they wanted to see was the museum's steps – all seventy-two of them. When we arrived at this major artistic institution, these young people jumped out of the vans and raced up the huge stone steps, their own personal recreation of Rocky's energizing run as he prepared to fight for the heavyweight championship of the world. (9-10)

This story shows how pop culture can influence a person's view of the world around them. The museum's meaning completely changed for the fans of this movie. The steps became an iconic place to visit and see just what Rocky saw as he prepared for the championship. This shows how pop culture exerts a very strong force upon our minds. This is no different when it comes to the apocalyptic thought surrounding our pop culture.

Many scholars have attempted to classify the different futures contemporary media

portray. One scholar, Alan Clardy, states that there are six types of futures that we imagine within pop culture. As Clardy says, “Indeed, as argued here, six visions of the future can be found in popular culture, and each one presents a fundamentally distinctive conception of the world to come” (37). These six futures include: progress and utopia, the anti-utopian nightmare, dystopia, conflict and resolution, collapse, and apocalypse. Clardy states there have been previous attempts at categorizing these futures; however, the ones Clardy delineates are separated even further into smaller categories. Each of these categories has specific histories and characteristics that define them. While many people use the term apocalypse to classify anything dealing with the potential end of the world, Clardy has a very specific definition. Clardy states: “In all of these manifestations, the paradigm of apocalypse shares several defining features. First, the end of this mortal world is ordained to arrive soon, often at a time predicted in great detail. Second, knowledge of this inevitable future has been obtained from extra-human, archaic, or divine sources and the prophecy revealed is doom” (44). With this sort of thinking, an apocalyptic future in pop culture becomes much more limited in its definition. While there are quite a few shows, books, and movies that discuss the end of the world, Clardy’s definition of apocalypse changes just how many can be classified as apocalyptic. However, this narrower definition does not change the fact that our society is very focused on the destruction of our world. In fact, the classifications of futures that Clardy presents show just how prominently current media is fixated on the future and the end of the world, and it undoubtedly can be discouraging for viewers to see these constant depictions of destruction without a type of buffer. However, modern depictions of the Four Horsemen offer a refreshingly hopeful alternative to this constant barrage of future negativity. While other apocalyptic narratives seem hopeless, these portrayals of Four Horsemen offer the chance for victory and survival. The popularity of the Four Horsemen is understandable when looking at the different types of futures Clardy describes, as, within his definition of the term apocalypse, the Book of Revelation is one of the few depictions that still fits the definition. However, the Four Horsemen are also popular because they offer viewers something that many other apocalypses do not: a way out.

Clardy is not the only scholar to point out how much of our media deals with potential futures; James Berger also discusses our society’s attachment to apocalyptic depiction, and he too offers potential insight into why our society might enjoy our modern depictions of the Four Horsemen. When talking about the apocalypse, Berger states:

To think that everything really is over would be a great relief, and a positive satisfaction. So many self-righteous and complacent individuals and institutions

would get their comeuppance in a hurry. Except that it has already happened. What will happen has happened, is happening. But the world is still here exactly as it was: that is what is intolerable. And therein lies the pleasure in imagining its destruction, and the horror and confusion in reflecting that such enormous, such definitive catastrophes have actually and in the flesh taken place. (32)

Berger is explaining that there is a pleasure in imagining the end of the world because at the end of the apocalypse there would be no more responsibility, and everything and everyone that had ever done something wrong to a person would be gone or would have gotten its punishment. However, I believe that, while people do enjoy imagining the apocalypse to a certain extent, there comes a point where people may want to think of a future without a destructive end. It begins to weigh on viewers' shoulders just how real these potential futures may be. Here too, the modern apocalypse of the Four Horsemen can offer a tantalizing alternative: while it gives viewers a chance to contemplate the end of the world, it also allows for the world to be saved. We want to imagine the end but we don't really want the world to end. The Book of Revelation doesn't offer believers much chance for optimism about our future in this world; however, this story has shifted within popular media to illustrate a way out. With Christianity being so prevalent in our society, we want to address this terrifying prophecy but shift it in a way that gives us an opportunity for more optimism.

Since Christianity plays such a large role in our culture, it can be easy to see why a book like Revelation would largely influence different media. According to Ericka Engstrom in the book *Television, Religion, and Supernatural: Hunting Monsters, Finding Gods*,

[w]hen one considers the religious identification of the U.S. population, U.S.

Census Bureau figures illustrate that most adults self-identify as Christian, and of those, most report describing themselves as Protestant. The latest census figures, from 2008, show that among some 228 million adults, more than 173 million (75%) identified themselves as belonging to some form of Christian religious group. (6)

This shows just how prominent the Christian religion is within America, and this has a large impact on the pop culture of America. However, there are many cultures fascinated by religion and apocalypse in addition to America; in the article, "Apocalypticism and Popular Culture in South Africa: An Overview and Update," Margaret Mollet argues that the reason millennial dispensationalism (belief that scripture is prophecy and is used to decide where a person is within the timetable of the Bible) is so embedded within people's minds is because of the influence pop culture has on its audience. This argument could also be made for apocalyptic thought being so prominent in American society today. There seems to be a

cyclical pattern of apocalyptic thought and of pop culture's use of the apocalypse. With each wave, the apocalypse becomes more and more embedded into our society. The role of the Four Horsemen within pop culture today is much the same of apocalypse as a whole.

With religion being such a strong force in America, it makes sense that it would influence our popular culture to some degree. This influence can be seen in our continuous representations of the future. With popular culture having such an influence over us, screenwriters of shows like *Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow* may be attempting to influence viewers to be more proactive in confronting the often-immobilizing threats against our world. These shows, while they are more unrealistic, seem to be calling viewers to act upon their fears of the world ending. The screenwriters want us to fight the "Four Horsemen," or our potential future apocalypses, just as their characters do.

There are quite a few mentions of the Four Horsemen in pop culture through songs, movies, books, and television shows. The television shows *Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow* are just a couple examples of the utilization of the Four Horsemen in pop culture. Both of these contain the Four Horsemen in different interpretations, but the Horsemen are still contributing to the apocalypse in some way. By looking at both of these representations, we can see how the Four Horsemen are used in pop culture, and we can understand the sense of hope they create for the audience.

SUPERNATURAL AND SLEEPY HOLLOW ANALYSIS

Supernatural, a CW television show that is currently in its thirteenth season, follows two brothers, Sam and Dean, on their journey fighting monsters of all kinds, including vampires, wendigos, demons, ghosts, angels, and even Lucifer himself. While the Four Horsemen don't appear until Season Five, their story arc begins at the end of season four, where the show leaves off with Sam and Dean inadvertently breaking the last of the show's 66 apocalyptic seals by killing the demon, Lilith, an action that starts the apocalypse by allowing Lucifer to rise from his cage. As the apocalypse begins in Season Five, Sam and Dean are told that they are to become the vessels of Lucifer and the archangel Michael, entities who will ultimately fight to decide the fate of the world. Throughout the season, Dean refuses to allow Michael to use him as a vessel, and Lucifer begins to use the Four Horsemen to destroy the world. The Four Horsemen, who are shown without horses and as older men, show up one by one just as they do in the Book of Revelation: first War, then Famine, Pestilence, and, finally, Death. Sam and Dean learn that, in order to stop Lucifer, they need the ring of each Horseman to open Lucifer's cage again and trap him once more.

Throughout the season, they encounter and fight War, Famine, and Pestilence and get their rings. (In the show, the Horsemen are unable to be killed, but without their respective rings, they cannot manifest a physical form on Earth or use their power). Finally, Dean makes a deal with Death and receives the final ring needed to carry out the plan to stop Lucifer and the apocalypse. When talking to Death, Dean learns that Death is enslaved to Lucifer and wants to be free, a situation that prompts the Horseman to help Sam and Dean defeat Lucifer and stop the apocalypse. While Dean does have to make a false promise to Death, saying that he will do whatever it takes to put Lucifer in his cage, even allowing Sam to fall into the cage as Lucifer's vessel, there is an expectation within this scene that they will be able to stop the apocalypse from happening.

Throughout the fifth season of *Supernatural*, Sam and Dean face all Four Horsemen and defeat or work with them one by one. This sort of story creates a hope that they will stop the apocalypse and put Lucifer back in his cage before the world ends. Even at the end of the season when Sam falls into Lucifer's cage with him in order to stop him, Sam and Dean's strong, brotherly bond constantly promises viewers that there is always a chance of bringing the other back when it seems impossible. In the next season, Dean visits Death again and asks him to bring Sam back from Lucifer's cage. Death agrees to do this if Dean retrieves his ring, which Dean did not return after borrowing, and wears it for a day to see what it is like being Death. He does this to show Dean just how hard his job is and how much it takes out of him. This shows the audience that Death isn't necessarily all bad and has a conscience just as we do—in this interpretation at least. While watching this unfold, the audience is able to see the Four Horsemen as not only conquerable but also as beings who have feelings like ours. It humanizes the entire storyline and allows for the audience to imagine the end of the world while still imagining ways to prevent this disaster from actually happening. The physical beings of the Four Horsemen offer a more positive ending to the apocalypse.

Another example of the Four Horsemen within pop culture is in the television show *Sleepy Hollow*. Season One opens in 1781 with Ichabod Crane on a mission for George Washington to kill a Hessian soldier with a bow and arrow tattoo on his hand. Ichabod finds the Hessian and, upon fighting him, is fatally injured; however, he is able to decapitate the soldier just before he dies. In the next scene, Ichabod wakes up in the year 2013, close to the same time the Headless Horseman does. The Horseman begins to kill throughout the town of Sleepy Hollow, and Ichabod is brought in by the police as a suspect. At the police station, Ichabod tries to explain who he is, and who the Horseman is, but no one takes him seriously

except one person—Lieutenant Abbie Mills. Her partner was killed by the Horseman, and after Ichabod describes the Horseman perfectly to her, she decides to listen to him. Soon the two begin to work together to figure out how to stop the Horseman. As the show progresses, the two learn that the horseman is actually the Horseman of Death from the Book of Revelation and that he plans on raising the other three Horsemen to begin the apocalypse. Abbie and Ichabod learn that they are the two witnesses that the Bible describes and are destined to stop the apocalypse and protect Sleepy Hollow. Throughout the show, Ichabod and Abbie begin to learn more about who the Horseman is and how to stop him.

In the end, they realize that the Horseman has a weakness to sunlight or UV lights, and, by exploiting this weakness, they are able to take the Horseman prisoner so that he can no longer try to raise the other three Horsemen. Just like in *Supernatural*, the audience is able to picture an oncoming apocalypse while still entertaining the possibility of victory and of a happy ending.

Both of these shows offer viewers more than just the chance to imagine the apocalypse; they offer the chance to hope for the world. The Four Horsemen in each of these examples are physical beings, able to be defeated by humans. The physical manifestation of the apocalypse allows for the audience to better visualize an actual end to the potential of apocalypse. These shows seem to be a call to action for viewers, for even if these are not realistic visions of our future, the Four Horsemen are a symbol for more realistic threats to humanity. The writers are calling for viewers to want a future for our world through these shows and their depiction of defeating the Four Horsemen.

Supernatural and *Sleepy Hollow* give viewers an opportunity to envision a future that they have control over. The writers for these shows seem to be offering the audience the chance to see their agency in the future of their world by depicting humans as the ones defeating the apocalypse. The Four Horsemen are a prominent cause of the apocalypse in media, but their role differs from other apocalyptic figures presented by the media. While much of contemporary media does deal with potential futures of our world, these futures tend to be more pessimistic with no way to stop the apocalypse from happening. In many of these portrayals, there are few survivors and little confidence of bringing the world back to what it once was. Within *Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow*, however, we are able to experience a different type of future. These shows offer a different telling of this story, one in which the human characters are able to defeat the Four Horsemen and stop the apocalypse. These television shows change the Book of Revelation to offer a more optimistic conclusion, which gives the viewers hope for their future. While Christianity being popular in the United

States plays a large role in the reasoning behind our portrayals of the Four Horsemen, I believe that our wish for a better future plays an even bigger role in the popularity of these interpretations, as media like *Sleepy Hollow* and *Supernatural* gives the audience a chance to envision a future that is no longer being plagued by the thought of impending doom. I believe these shows are asking viewers to see that humans are the ones who can stop the apocalypse; we just have to acknowledge this responsibility and work toward a better future. Rather than presenting apocalypses that seem unstoppable and give viewers a pessimistic view of the future, viewers are given a reason to hope. This want for a better future is what our society needs, and that is what makes these types of depictions so important.

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GABRIELLA MARCARELLI is a third year undergraduate student enrolled in the Humanities program at New College of Florida. She has been making art since childhood, and continues to pursue art making as a hobby. If one were to ask her what she found interesting in art, she would reply, “art that challenges conventions, especially in a playful way”.