



## Apocalyptic Literature

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**Abstract :** *Apocalyptic literature is a sub-genre of science fiction that is concerned with the end of civilization i.e. the dooms day. It is the unseen world of the evil spirits which is concerned with the end of civilization due to existential catastrophe such as: -*

*Impact event- which deals with the effect of catastrophe natural or unnatural on the world like war, plague, or attack by supernatural beings.*

*Dysgenics- which means exerting any harmful effect on later generations who might inherit undesirable characteristics.*

*Supernatural Phenomena- not existing in nature or subject to explanation according to natural laws.*

*In this research paper we have discussed Apocalyptic literature with reference to Mary Shelley's 'The Last Man' (1886), Doris Lessing's 'The Memoirs of a Survivor' (1916), and Carrie Ryan's 'The Forest of Hands and Teeth' covering three different centuries. Apocalyptic features like pessimism, secrecy, transcendence have been identified in these novels.*

**Keywords:** *Apocalyptic , Dooms day , Impact Event , Dysgenics , Supernatural Phenomena.*

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### Introduction :

**Apocalyptic literature** is a genre of prophetic writing that developed in post-exile Jewish culture and was popular among early Christians. The term "Apocalypse" is a Greek word for "revelation" which means "an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known." Apocalyptic literature is a literary genre that foretells supernaturally inspired cataclysmic events that will transpire at the end of the world. An apocalypse is a literary report of a fearful, often violent, vision that reveals truths about past, present and future times in highly symbolic and

poetical terms. The author may represent himself as transported into a heavenly realm, or the vision may be unveiled—and even interpreted—by an angelic messenger. Apocalypse “intended to interpret the present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the *understanding* and the *behavior* of the audience by means of divine authority.”(Aune, 5).

Apocalyptic fiction is a sub-genre of science fiction that is concerned with the end of civilization due to a potentially existential catastrophe such as nuclear warfare, pandemic, extraterrestrial attack, impact event, cybernetic revolt, singularity, dysgenics, supernatural phenomena, divine judgment, climate change, resource depletion or some other general disaster. Post-apocalyptic fiction is set in a world or civilization after such a disaster. The time frame may be immediately after the catastrophe, focusing on the travails or psychology of survivors, or considerably later, often including the theme that the existence of pre-catastrophe civilization has been forgotten (or mythologized).

### **Subdivisions or Types of Apocalypses:**

- Apocalypses can be classified according to features in their CONTENT:
  - Some apocalypses contain “Otherworldly Journeys” (e.g., the seer is purportedly taken on a tour of heaven)
  - Others do *not* contain “Otherworldly Journeys” (e.g., while seeing heavenly things, the seer stays on earth)
- Apocalypses can also be classified according to their primary REFERENCES:
  - Some apocalypses deal with *Personal* Eschatology (the death and after-life of individuals)
  - Others focus more on *Ethnic* or *National*

Eschatology (the end of a nation or empire)

- Many others contain *Cosmic* Eschatology (the ultimate end of the whole world).

The world of apocalyptic literature can be both vast and confusing. To journey successfully through its complexities, it is best to have an experienced tour guide to direct you to the sites most representative of that world. In this way the new traveler can avoid dead ends, skip the fruitless excursions, and instead enjoy the ride. (Mitchell, 2)

### **Salient Features of Apocalyptic Literature :**

1. All apocalyptic literature claim to be revelation of new/hidden knowledge.
2. Apocalyptic literature often uses prophetic vision formula to see the future, “and I saw...” is the phrase that appears many times in Revelation. However it is not there in the earliest examples of the genre.
3. The literature uses mysterious and symbolic language. This is ironic, as the name means “unveiling” and then the writing goes to lengths to clothe everything in symbolism.
4. Apocalypses tend to be pessimistic about the possibility for positive change during the present age. What is needed is a radical divine intervention to overthrow God’s enemies and set things right.
5. The main theme celebrates God’s victory over evil.
6. Apocalyptic literature is preoccupied with future events. While it does not envision the end of the cosmos, it does envision the end of evil and suffering and the visible reign of God on earth. The earth and Heavens as they are might end and be replaced or they might be cleansed where they are without being destroyed first. Either way, they will be purged.

7. Apocalypse contains a sharp dualism, a contrast between the present age dominated by evil and a coming age of change.

**Themes :**

The basic themes in 'Apocalyptic Literature' are: -

- War
- Environmental disaster
- Cozy-Catastrophe
- Failure of Modern technology
- Aliens
- Pandemic
- Zombies

**War:** - War and its impact on the world is the most common theme used in apocalyptic novels. War is an organized and often prolonged armed conflict that is carried out by states or non-states actors. It is characterized by extreme violence, social disruption, and economic destruction. The set of techniques used by a group to carry out war is known as 'Warfare'.

**Environmental Disaster :-** An environmental disaster is a result of human activity. Environmental disaster affects agriculture, biodiversity, the economy and human health. The causes include pollution, depletion of natural resources, industrial activity, etc. which distinguish it from the concept of natural disaster. The theme of environmental disaster is widely used in apocalyptic novels.

**Cozy-Catastrophe :-** The cozy-catastrophe is a style of post-apocalyptic science fiction. A cozy-catastrophe is typically one in which civilization comes to an end and everyone is killed except for the main characters, who survive relatively unscathed and are then freed from prior constraints of civilization.

**Failure of Modern technology :-** There is no doubt that science and technology have improved the quality of modern life. Innovations like the personal computer, advances in digital photography have become so accepted that it is difficult to imagine human existence without them. However, science is not infallible and sometimes things can go wrong. In some cases, scientific failures just mean a trip back to the drawing board. In others, loss of human life is the tragic result. Thus, the theme of failure of modern technology is very common in apocalyptic novels.

**Aliens :-** The alien is a common theme in science fiction novels, stories and film, in which extraterrestrials invade Earth either to exterminate and supplant human life, enslave it under a colonial system, harvest humans for food, steal the planet's resources, or destroy the planet altogether. Unlike many other recurring enemy extraterrestrial races in science fiction, the Aliens do not have a technological civilization, but are predatory creatures with no higher goals than the propagation of their species and the destruction of life that could pose a threat.

**Pandemic :-** A pandemic can be defined as "an epidemic occurring worldwide or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries, and usually affecting a large number of people". A pandemic is an epidemic of infectious disease that has spread through human populations across a large region; for instance multiple continents, or even worldwide. A widespread endemic disease that is stable in terms of how many people are getting sick from it is not a pandemic. Further, flu pandemics generally exclude recurrences of seasonal flu. Throughout history there have been a number of pandemics, such as smallpox and tuberculosis.

**Zombies :-** Zombies are fictional half-dead creatures regularly encountered in works of horror

and fantasy works. They are typically depicted as mindless, reanimated corpses with a hunger for human flesh, and particularly for human brains in some depictions. Intimately tied to the conception of the modern zombie is the “zombie apocalypse”: the breakdown of society as a result of an initial zombie outbreak, which spreads. In a zombie apocalypse, a widespread (usually global) rise of zombies hostile to human life engage in a general assault on civilization. Victims of zombies may become zombies themselves. This causes the outbreak to become an exponentially growing crisis: the spreading “zombie plague/virus” swamps normal military and law enforcement organizations, leading to a collapse of civilian society until only isolated pockets of survivors remain, scavenging for food and supplies in a world reduced to a pre-industrial hostile wilderness.

#### **The last man :**

*The last man* is Mary Shelley’s apocalyptic fantasy of the end of human civilization. Shelly weaves a fantastic version of the end of the world in the year 2100. Told from the perspective of the only survivor of a devastating plague that snuffs out humanity, the story subtly incorporates elements of proto-science fiction and horror. The novel is set in late twenty first century with first person narration.

It is a futuristic story of tragic love and of the gradual extermination of the human race by plague, the novel offers a vision of the future that expresses a reaction against Romanticism, and demonstrates the failure of the imagination and of art to redeem the doomed characters.

The story begins with the narrator finding a manuscript in an inaccessible cave. One follows Verney’s manuscript from his early roots as a poverty stricken orphan to his friendship with the throne of England and to a military campaign with his brother-in-law into plague stricken Turkey, a campaign which triggers off world-wide plague that

wipes out human population on earth. The protagonist Lionel Verney says, “A truce to philosophy!-life is before me and I rush into possession. Hope, glory, love, and blameless ambition are my guides, and my soul knows no dread”. (Shelley,07).

#### **Memoirs of a Survivor :**

The *Memoirs of a Survivor* by Doris Lessing is a fantasy fable about the breakdown of the modern system and suggests a process of redemption by divine grace. The novel is narrated by an intelligent middle aged woman who calmly confronts the disintegration of her city. In this novel, the future is illustrated as chaotic and bleak - the government is corrupt and unresponsive, the air is polluted and the sky, as if representing the future, is usually dark. The streets are ruled by youth gangs as the disintegration of family units force the children to fight for their survival, making them heartless and roguish. Family units break down and survivors band together for basic survival.

In a beleaguered city where rats and roving gangs terrorize the streets, where government has broken down and meaningless violence holds sway, a woman — middle-aged and middle-class — brought a twelve-year-old girl and takes the responsibility to raise the child. Thus the novel is an account of:

- Breakdown of civilization due to nuclear war.
- Transcendence which means existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level. It also explores the possibility of spiritual transcendence in the modern world.
- The novel also shows a complex technological civilization.

With special reference to Doris Lessing, Auden has clearly said,

“We must love one another or die” (Auden, 05).



Thus it is a dark visionary novel where men, women and children are fighting for survival in a world that is swiftly falling apart. The end of the novel suggests "We must care, we must take on responsibility. We will be disillusioned, defeated, but we must."(Lessing, 315).

### **The Forest of Hands and Teeth :**

*The Forest of Hands and Teeth* by Carrie Ryan is an evocative novel in a post-apocalyptic world where cities have fallen and zombies have devoured most of humanity. The novel is narrated in first person. It is a zombie-horror-romance novel.

The novel is about an isolated village which is surrounded by fences, beyond which lies only forest. According to the sisterhood the village is the only human habitation left on earth. Mary is fascinated by the stories passed down by her ancestors about life before the coming of the zombies. Mary is mostly preoccupied by the ocean and believes if she could reach it, she would be free. The world Carrie Ryan sketches is a bleak, futureless world that seems to have gone straight back to the middle ages.

The novel appears to be breaking away from religion, superstition and fear mongers. Mary in a post-apocalyptic world looks for ocean, a longing for something greater and believes that no matter what, one should never give up his/her dreams. Thus the novel shows how fear and self-imposed isolation can cripple one's freedom. The novel ends with Mary thinking on the beach, "my brother sacrificed his life for me, the guy I love died for me. I can't let my life go to waste. They would not want that."(Ryan, 443).

### **Conclusion :**

The apocalyptic literature proved a highly popular, religious and didactic topos throughout. It is usually written from a context of oppression, persecution and despair. In all the three novels discussed, there is invariably a site of exile, wars,

catastrophe, gloominess and despair. All the writers have tried their best to alleviate grief but felt 'doubly exiled'.

In *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley reveals the effects of plague upon the civilisations of the western world. The novel makes few gestures towards its futuristic genre. Powerful vision of transience lies at the heart of the novel which is concerned with the devastation of the world through a kind of plague in the twenty first century.

In the *Memoirs of a Survivor*, one finds oppressive forces at work. Lessing speculates that in the narrowness and impermanence of the exterior world, all the odd values will be swept away. Lessing makes one understand that the interior and the exterior worlds are close together. Lessing's explorers of another major theme i.e the inner life which is rich with possibilities. The title *Memoirs of a Survivor* is meant to suggest 'WE ENDURE.'

While in *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, Carrie Ryan through her protagonist emphasises on the fact that when there is no one, one needs to stand for oneself. We do not need to be afraid or get deviated because of the harsh circumstances. Though the protagonist and the village is surrounded by despair, yet she never gives up hope and dreams for a better world when everyone around her gives up.

Apocalyptic novels discussed here are filled with symbolism where the present age is dominated by something evil. A sense of "dooms day" can be felt all through in the novels. This trauma is so very intense that the readers beautifully connect to this. All the apocalyptic novels tend to be deterministic- portraying an inescapable future.

In the three novels the events that are contemporary to the author are often portrayed as if they were prophesised long ago, so that what is

happening in the author's day is merely a fulfilment of what was revealed centuries before.

### Common Apocalyptic Features in the novels

	Apocalyptic Features	NOVELS		
		The Last Man (1886)	Memoirs of a Survivor (1916)	The Forest of Hands and Teeth (2009)
1.	End of civilization	Natural catastrophe like, plague.	Due to fall out of something like, nuclear war.	The world is overtaken by supernatural beings.
2.	Failure of science	No medicine available to fight plague.	Science is unable to combat the holocaust of a nuclear war.	Scientific inventions could not protect the world from being overtaken by zombies.
3.	Cozy catastrophe	The narrator survives at the end.	The protagonist survives at the end.	The narrator survives at the end.

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