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## Undergraduate Research Contest: Fictional Reactions to Disaster

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### Fictional Reactions to Disaster

Many readers seek fictional post-apocalyptic worlds to escape from the mundane life of the real-world. But even so, plenty of people believe that the real world will come to a disastrous end within their lifetime. There does not seem to be consensus on how humanity would fare if the world experienced an apocalyptic disaster, but many authors of post-apocalyptic works have attempted to capture how humankind would react in disaster and post-disaster scenarios. Some authors write of humanity banding together while other authors write of humanity falling apart. One could wonder how likely each of these outcomes is. In this paper, “After-Images” by Malcolm Edwards, “The Last of the O-Forms” by James Van Pelt, “A Pail of Air” by Fritz Leiber, and “Artie’s Angels” by Catherine Wells will be analyzed and compared to psychological and genre-specific research found in *Psychosocial Capacity Building in Response to Disasters* by Joshua Miller, *Psychology of Trauma 101* by Lesia Ruglass, and “Beyond Human Boundaries: Variations of Human Transformation in Science Fiction” by Sayyed Ali Mirenyat. In each literary work, the characters will be examined in relation to trauma and survivor psychology and to the tropes often found within the genre of science fiction. Through this technique, one determines how likely a response in a disaster scenario really is in a fictional work.

Whether an individual realizes it or not, surviving a post-apocalyptic event will inevitably leave that person with PTSD. PTSD stands for post-traumatic stress disorder, which is a reaction that people have after experiencing a traumatic event, such as a natural disaster or a near-death

experience. In *Psychosocial Capacity Building in Response to Disasters* by Joshua Miller, Miller posits that the disaster itself is not the part to focus on—the crucial element of disaster psychology is how those involved in the disaster respond to it afterwards, and what meaning the individuals decide the disaster has on their lives (Miller 85). If an individual grew up in a cushy, upper-class lifestyle, he or she would most likely be less prepared for a disaster where survival is involved as compared to an individual who grew up learning survival skills and street smarts. Those with innocent minds often cannot take the strain of a harsh new world, while those who have already experienced past trauma are better able to handle a world they already viewed as harsh. The amount of resiliency found in individual people affects whether a healthy or unhealthy community will form post-disaster. If a group of unstable individuals form a community, that community is bound to be corrupt, but if a group of stable individuals form a community, that community is much more likely to thrive (Miller).

In *Psychology of Trauma 101* by Lesia Ruglass, Ruglass posits that PTSD affects not just the survivor, but the family of the survivor as well. Families who are affected by PTSD are twice as likely to experience divorce, and spouses struggling with PTSD are at an increased risk for domestic violence (Ruglass 96). If a family survives a disaster scenario, each member of the family will react to the trauma in different ways. If one family member reacts in an especially negative way, without seeking the support of those around them, then the support unit of the family may dissolve as a result. This refers to Miller's point, in that having even one unstable or weak link in a community can be disastrous for the entire group. While PTSD can lead to divorce or abuse between romantic partners, the trauma of PTSD can also be passed on to children born after the traumatic event has occurred. Children of individuals of PTSD can either grow up to be stronger and better-adjusted after learning from their parents' mistakes, or they can be just as lost

and broken as their parents are. Whether the authors of post-apocalyptic science fiction are well-versed in survivor psychology or not, the effects of PTSD can be applied to literary characters to help break down why those characters react the way they do within their stories.

When the word “apocalypse” is heard in real-life, it normally brings negative connotations along with it. However, the fictional worlds that are found after an apocalyptic event can often be stronger or better in some ways when compared to the world that existed before the disaster event. This is a theme that readers can find in real-life as well. Hurricane Katrina struck the eastern coast of the United States and knocked hundreds of thousands of houses to the ground. Houses built post-Hurricane Katrina were stronger and were built higher off the ground with frames made of stronger materials (Miller 3). This was less of a transformation made by the houses, however, and more a transformation made by humankind. After the disaster event has occurred and the world has been wiped to a clean slate, mankind is left to come up with new policies, religions, ideologies, and perhaps most importantly, technology. In “Beyond Human Boundaries: Variations of Human Transformation in Science Fiction” by Sayyed Ali Mirenayat, Mirenayat posits that in post-apocalyptic stories, human transformation can best be achieved through the invention and use of new technology (Mirenayat 270). While Mirenayat is specifically referring to the idea of transhumanism, this quotation can also deal with humans using technology to affect the outside world. Many post-apocalyptic stories carry the trope of a toxic environment polluting the planet or making the world dangerous, so mankind builds some sort of fortress to protect themselves. While these fortresses could be a haven for those within, there will always be those left on the outside, unable to use that technology to their own advantage. Depending on how the characters within the world handle their trauma and grasp technology after the disaster event, the environment could become

hostile or safe for mankind to live in. This also affects how realistic a fictional world is after the apocalyptic event—if humanity reacts in a positive way post-disaster, the world is more likely to become a utopia, while if humanity reacts in a negative way, the world is more likely to fall into a dystopia.

Despite the opinion of Mirenyat being that the technological advancement of society would be a positive effect, not every post-apocalyptic science fiction author writes with the same intention. “After-Images” by Malcolm Edwards is an example of a post-apocalyptic story where the technology invented in the story is no longer an aid to society. Edwards writes of a world where a nuclear bomb detonation has been slowed by a technological device called “the bubble” or “the interface,” which keeps the nuclear explosion contained within it. However, the interface continues to expand day by day, and there is no way to stop its spreading. The technology of the interface has negatively affected the post-disaster population. Only the upper class has been given the opportunity to escape the reach of the disaster—the lower-class people, like the main character Norton, are left to perish to the disaster. Norton is convinced to enter the interface at the urging of his friend, Richard Carver, whose complacency thanks to the interface has made him view the nuclear explosion as harmless. This turns out not to be the case, as Carver accidentally trips into a suspended fireball within the interface. Edwards describes Carver’s demise, writing, “By the time Carver hit the ground all that was left of him was a charred heap of smouldering detritus which blew away in clouds of ash even as it settled” (Edwards 326). Norton, after witnessing Carver’s demise, exits the interface not filled with fear or a drive to escape the nuclear blast, but with relief. Miller in *Psychosocial Capacity Building in Response to Disasters* posits that we need other people as a buffer against trauma reactions, so we do not emotionally “lose it.” Losing it has adverse consequences, leading to social withdrawal from

those around you. While disaster does have the ability to bring people closer, especially if they have experienced the same event, that is not the response that Norton has in this story (Miller 93). Norton has had an unhealthy reaction to the disaster—instead of hoping for and working towards a chance to survive that horrible end, Norton only hopes for the end to come sooner rather than later. Unlike Carver, Norton's complacency does not come from underestimating the power of the nuclear bomb. His complacency comes from the fact that his drive to survive has been crushed, and he allows other to live in complacency as well. His neighbor, Mr. McDonald, truly believes that he and his wife will be able to survive the nuclear blast, since he followed the instruction protocols handed out by the government. Norton considers telling McDonald how futile his efforts are, but instead he thinks, "But it would only hurt and confuse the old man, who was simply following the instructions which he has been told would keep him safe" (Edwards 327). In this case, Norton has taken his PTSD from watching Carver die and has isolated himself, deciding that he would rather die than try to survive against the force of the nuclear blast. He does not consider trying to run or attempting to warn others of the approaching devastation. He has accepted his fate and only waits for his demise. Edwards has created a world in which the disaster has reduced the human population to dull complacency. Edwards point, however, is the opposite of Norton's decision. Edwards is pointing out that humanity should not be complacent with our advanced technology and doomsday weapons that are tossed around like toys. This is a piece of literature that paints nuclear disaster as a horrific beauty and pushes the message that humanity needs to always fight to survive.

Another post-apocalyptic story that follows the idea that a disaster would ruin mankind is "The Last of the O-Forms" by James Van Pelt. Van Pelt writes of a world where genetic mutations have changed the planet. The human population has been crippled, and no more

“normal” children can be born anymore. The story follows a man named Trevin and his daughter, Caprice, who is genetically different herself in that she has the intelligence of a grown woman while having the body of a two-year-old. Animal mutations have widely been accepted as tolerable or even mundane, but human mutations are still frowned upon, so Trevin keeps Caprice hidden. While Trevin and Caprice do struggle to survive, they go about surviving by taking advantage of the world around them. Instead of pitying the mutated animals, such as tigerzelles or crocomice, or trying to find a way to reverse the genetic mutations, Trevin and Caprice use them for profit. Trevin runs a zoo, hanging banners from his trucks that read, “DR. TREVIN’S TRAVELING ZOOLOGICAL EXTRAVAGANZA. SEE NATURE’S ODDITIES! EDUCATIONAL! ENTERTAINING!” (Van Pelt 155). Trevin and Caprice feel no sympathy for the mutated animals that they keep locked in cages—all they care about is having enough money to survive. This is already an example of how Trevin and Caprice’s minds have been negatively affected by their world. They no longer have the urge to make life better; they only wish to get by. However, by the end of the story, it is revealed Trevin has no sympathy for even his own daughter. When the people of the nearby town mistake Caprice for an unmutated child, Trevin takes advantage. He imagines using Caprice as a new act to make money, “The banner would say THE LAST O-FORM GIRL CHILD, and he would *charge* them, yes he would, and they would line *up*” (Van Pelt 160). In this post-apocalyptic world, humanity has fallen into disrepair. Caprice wishes she could be accepted as she is, but instead, she is sold off as an oddity by her own father, who cannot accept her. Ruglass in *Psychology of Trauma 101* refers to a report by the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense. This report found that the children of parents with PTSD had more issues with anxiety, emotional problems, depression, and withdrawal than children who have parents who are not suffering from PTSD (Ruglass 105).

While that report dealt specifically with the children of soldiers who had gone through war, this research can still be applied to the fictional parents and children found within post-apocalyptic fiction. Surviving a near world-ending event is equal to the effect of surviving a war, and perhaps the effects of surviving an apocalyptic event would be even more detrimental to an individual than a war. The research of Ruglass in *Psychology of Trauma 101* suggests that Caprice was doomed from her birth to live a fragmented life due to her father's mindset being corrupted by PTSD. Humanity does not view the genetic mutations in Van Pelt's world as something they can cure or something they should work to get over—instead, mutations mean that the creatures should be put down or separated off. Van Pelt has created a world that has divided by those who are accepted and those who are not.

However, not all authors gravitate to a world where humanity separates or falls apart. A work with a more innocent outlook on the apocalypse is “A Pail of Air” by Fritz Leiber. The disaster in Lieber's story is that the Earth has moved away from the sun, so the Earth has gotten impossibly cold and the layers of gases in the atmosphere have stratified. The narrator of the story is a child, who knows nothing different from this world that he has been born into. He does not view the world as a disastrous environment or an enemy—in fact, the way he describes the world is beautiful. Lieber writes, “Some taller buildings push up out of the feathery plain, topped by rounded caps of air crystals, like the fur hood Ma wears, only whiter” (Lieber 188). The imagery of a “feathery plain,” “rounded caps of air crystals,” and “the fur hood Ma wears” are all stunning images, preserving the pristine image of snow and white that this world exists in. Miller in *Psychological Capacity Building to Disasters* posits that the variation found between the mentalities of disaster survivors is due to differences in vulnerability, resiliency, social support, and how the disaster fits in with prior life experiences (Miller 86). The narrator and his family



have fought to survive in this new world, building a Nest thanks to the father's science background. The family survives despite having no proof that humanity exists outside of their Nest. While the mother and even father view the outside world as an unforgiving danger, the narrator views the world in a totally different way, because he was born into it and grew up as a survivor supported by his family—he has a stronger resiliency than any other character in the story. The mother and father reminisce of the kinder world they no longer have, but the narrator has no prior experience to compare the outside world to. In the end, the family's patience and hard work is rewarded. They are found by other humans who have established colonies and the other humans invite the narrator and his family to go and live with them. The narrator is nervous about leaving the Nest, but his father gives him some sound advice, "The trouble with the world was that it kept getting smaller and smaller, till it ended with just the Nest. Now it'll be good to have a real huge world again, the way it was in the beginning" (Lieber 198). Despite the traumatic event that the narrator's family has gone through, and the dangers that the narrator has faced himself, the family within the Nest have not decided to withdraw from the world or take on an "us vs. them" mentality. The mother at first seemed to be scarred by the outside world, believing she would never be ready to rejoin a society again. However, even she can connect to the other humans, asking what kind of clothing the women wear in the new colony. Even the most damaged member of the family can adapt, and this is because the family has dealt with their PTSD as a connected unit, and all of them are ready to emerge from the Nest. Lieber has created a world where isolation has not separated humanity but made them more eager to come back together. If these characters had all separated and devolved, it would be unrealistic to expect them to rejoin humanity. However, since these characters stuck together and responded to the

disaster in an overall healthy manner, it is realistic and encouraging to the audience that these characters are ready to restart humanity again.

A final fictional story that has a more positive outlook on the fate of humanity after an apocalyptic disaster is “Artie’s Angels” by Catherine Wells. Earth’s environment has been wrecked beyond repair, and the healthy, more obedient members of humanity live within a safety zone called the Kansas Habitat. The main character is a girl named Faye who is called Morgan by her close friend and brotherly figure, Artie. This is a reference to Morgan Le Fay from the King Arthur mythos, with Artie being representative of the character King Arthur. Despite the ravages of the world outside of the Kansas Habitat, there are still crimes and violence being committed within the Kansas Habitat. Mirenyat may argue that the technology of the KanHab keeps those within safe compared to the dangers of the outside world, and while this may be true, humanity is still fundamentally crippled. As a result, Artie and Morgan decide to form a group to keep the Kansas Habitat safe on the inside. Artie even establishes a code that all his group must follow, like the knights of the round table. Wells writes, “The Code was fairly simple at that point: Take care of your bike and your friends; never fight when you can run; study and learn; make things better for everyone, not just yourself” (Wells 171). The novel is filled with references to King Arthur and the knights of the round table, illustrating the nobility of Artie and his group. Mirenyat posits that it is a natural human urge to reach new capacities. Humans always want to push the boundaries, whether that be socially, geographically, or intellectually (Mirenyat 266). For characters in a post-apocalyptic world, the newly-raised Earth may be viewed as less of a hinderance and more of a *tabula rasa*, or clean slate. The world can be molded into a new image and the world is capable of being shifted to be entirely different than it was before. This is what has been done by Artie and his gang. At the end of the novel, Artie is

killed in a shooting. However, rather than tell the inhabitants of the KanHab that Artie is dead, Morgan lies and says he has left the planet but will one day come back to save them all. Wells writes, “The stories of Artie’s exploits grow richer with each telling; and in them he succeeds, in ways he could only dream of, in protecting the helpless and improving the lives of those he left behind” (Wells 175). This is the best outcome that could have occurred in a post-apocalyptic world. Not only has humanity drawn together in order to fight for survival, but a select group has taken it upon themselves to protect the innocent and enforce order in a way that is fair. Wells has crafted a world where humanity does not just survive but attempts to thrive after the events of the apocalypse. This world reflects Joshua Miller’s theories that the resiliency of individuals reflects how strong the community is that grows out of the disaster. Morgan and Artie were both strong characters, and as a result they were able to form an even stronger community that thrived after the disaster. This story is reflecting the same message that Lieber’s story was making. Morgan and Artie did not let the disastrous world around them keep them from forming a community, and Morgan did not let Artie’s death ruin what they had worked so hard to build. Thanks to their healthy mindsets and urge to make the world a better place, the story is reflecting that having hope and supporting others through disaster is the best way to achieve a better world.

Looking back on each of these fictional works and comparing their stories and characters to the psychological and literary research, one can see that each of these stories, despite how different their endings are, are all psychologically-sound and “believable” in their endings. One could wonder whether having a “realistic” ending is the point when it comes to fictional stories, especially post-apocalyptic stories that often have a manner of the fantastic in them. Many people claim that they read for a sense of escapism, so they can get away from the stress of reality. After reading and analyzing these works, however, having a realistic ending and realistic

reactions from characters only makes a story more engaging. If a disaster event occurred and all the characters only reacted one way or another—they all became vicious and blood-thirsty or they all became noble and heroic—it would not be believable, especially when looking at real reactions to disasters. Some people bounce back from disasters ready to rebuild, while others never recover from the loss of their previous lives. This can be seen within all the stories, and with two stories with horrible endings (“After-Images” and “The Last of the O-Forms”) and two others with heart-warming endings (“A Pail of Air” and “Artie’s Angels”), none of these endings can be considered “wrong.” When examining how the characters behaved post-disaster, and then comparing these characters to psychological studies and studies of literature, each of the endings of these stories are realistic and engaging for audiences because the audiences are better able to relate to the characters. Humanity already lives in a post-disaster world, and it could be argued that humanity has not handled it in a positive way. In a world where nuclear warfare constantly looms on the horizon, now more than ever humanity needs to look at the examples set by all the stories covered in this paper. Whether humanity is looking at the cautionary bleak tales of “After-Images” or “The Last of the O-Forms,” or if humanity is examining the beautiful and inspiring stories of “A Pail of Air” or “Artie’s Angels,” these stories have set the standard that humanity should strive for—making an effort to group together in order to make the world better than it has previously been.