
**THE THEME OF GLOBAL CATASTROPHES IN DYSTOPIAN NOVELS OF THE
XX AND XXI CENTURIES**

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ANNOTATION

The force of modern globalization and the presence of dystopian energies in contemporary fiction need to be understood within the framework of Modernity and the manner in which it coincides with the rise of the modern city. Charles Baudelaire is thought to be the first poet to use the term “Modern” to describe the experience of industrialized, urban living, but using his works as a starting point can date the field all the way back to near 1840, which makes it so large as to be nearly meaningless as a descriptor.² I take Modernism to demarcate the 35-plus year period between 1900 and the start of WWII in 1938. This locates the field as a successor to the Victorian Era, and situates it at a time in which many metropolises across the Atlantic were encountering new technologies of travel, mass communication and industrialization.

Key words: *catastrophe, dystopian, century, become, old*

Carl Sandburg’s 1920 poem “Manual System” speaks directly to this confluence of communication and technology: Mary has a thingamajig clamped on her ears And sits all day taking plugs out and sticking plugs in. Flashes and flashes—voices and voices calling for ears to put words in Faces at the ends of wires asking for other faces at the ends of other wires: All day taking plugs out and sticking plugs in, Mary has a thingamajig clamped on her ears. Mary, who works as a telephone operator, has a “thingamajig clamped on her ears” (1) as she connects people to one another, people who are conceived as “Faces at the ends of wires asking for other faces / at the ends of other wires” (5-6). The poem is significant because in but a few brief lines Sandburg highlights the way a variety of forces worked in concursion to cross borders—literal and cultural – during the transatlantic Modern period. As her name implies, the main character of the poem is a woman, and a working woman at that. Like many women in the Modern period, Mary has moved into the working world, a precursor to the great influx of women into the U.S. workforce during World War II. And yet Mary isn’t just working, she’s working with new technology. “All day” long she is able to connect people to one another through the relatively new technology of the phone. So vital and important was this kind of new technology within the period that it literally becomes blended into the fabric of humanity: the wires connecting people are plugged directly into human faces, so that technology and humanity becomes a nearly homogenous unit. And the image we are left with is one of Mary as a type of motor or bridge, the person who keeps the mechanized human beings in contact with one another. In this sense, Sandburg positions newness (in technology, constructions of gender, and a variety of other domains) as the engine of the Modern period, the thing that binds together and animates a world that is often understood to have been defined by its traversing of new borders and new identities through the use of advancing technology. Baudelaire composed *The Painter of Modern Life* in 1859, and by the high Modern period some 60 years later, technologies of communication afforded, to different degrees, the opportunity for society at large to function as a flâneur in a transcultural exchange. In *Reading 1922*, Michael North discusses the world voyages of major artists like Claude McKay and Charlie Chaplin (who detailed his travels in *My Trip Abroad*), arguing that the position of the flâneur was alive and well in the Modern period. But just as significantly, North suggests that the advent of national media forces like the BBC offered a transcultural veneer to society, connecting even peoples whose lives did not involve direct access to travel and offering the masses access to the media’s roving, observing eye (16). This line of thinking is later echoed in Arjun Appadurai’s

concepts of a mediascapes and ethnoscapas. 4 Appadurai argues that globalization constitutes landscapes of people who comprise the shifting world in which we live; tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups of persons. The mediascape is a kind of portal into and out of which visual cultural information travels. For Appadurai, who is a critic of globalization and not Modernist scholar, these scapes are a way to conceptualize fluidity in media and migration. North suggests that these media portals blossomed in the Modernist period, forcing audiences to be more aware of the diversity of the human experience; asking Modern audiences to view themselves and their culture as contextual, not universal, with the media as an interlocutor (110).

Modernist writers explored urban dystopias in less drastic terms than Jack London, though still within the context of the intersection of global technologies and the growth of urban communities. While these authors do not portray societies in the obvious physical or political disrepair of *The Scarlet Plague*, they still illustrate communities faltering under dystopian impulses which eliminate small communities, and replace them with large, potentially dangerous collections of un-connected peoples and energies. During this period, critics viewed the city as simultaneously advanced, progressive and global, and a chaotic, dangerous space that unmoors its inhabitants from previous identities. Walter Benjamin's writings after World War I lay the foundation for a dystopian⁶ view of Modernity that he later expands upon in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Jessica Berman notes that Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller* laments the loss of knowable communities to the fragmentation of the modernizing transcontinental world: In the twentieth century [...] social experience becomes fragmentary; the only community available seems to be the "community of speech [...]" Both Benjamin and Williams imagine community as the crucial link between speaker and listener and thus as the underlying condition of storytelling. Both Benjamin and Williams also imagine community as the realm in which narrative and history coincide, the realm in which past experiences in common make possible a shared linguistic meaning. And both see, in twentieth-century Europe, the problem of the loss of this realm of the knowable, a loss which becomes for them a key experience of the narratives of modernism. (2) Jameson implies that belief is a fundamental element of utopian thinking; that a synthesis between subject and object - and in the case of utopian philosophy, the subject is understood as society, and the object as its ideal or most perfect state of being or function - can be enacted through a belief structure. Many religions, at their core, rely on utopian ideology, promising providence or enlightenment as a reward for behavior that adheres to the belief system. Jameson's concerns, however, are closely tied to art, politics and secular philosophies, arguing that the primary engine of all political energy is a faith in the systematized improvement of society through the implementation of a social construct.

The disillusion with even the possibility of utopian progress becomes a major feature of literature and cultural criticism in the mid-to-late Twentieth Century. Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests that science and "metanarratives" have always been in conflict with one another (*The Postmodern Condition*). 8 Moreover, he argues that the Enlightenment is a grand narrative, wherein knowledge works toward the ethical and social goal of peace. He questions the validity of that narrative, however, terming his suspicions "postmodern" and describing the postmodern condition as "an incredulity toward metanarratives [...] the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages [...] it is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements - narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive and so on" (509). Perhaps the most fitting description comes from the seminal work *Shape of Utopia*, where Robert C. Elliot comments: To believe in utopia one must believe that through the exercise of their reason men can control and in major ways alter for the

better their social environment [...] To believe in utopia one must have faith of a kind that our history has made nearly inaccessible. This is one major form of the crisis of faith under which Western culture reels.

LITERATURE

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