

Post-Apocalyptic Literature: Humanity's Survival Tool

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Abstract

Humanity's survival is a foundational plot element in post-apocalyptic literature. Within the genre, plagues, natural disasters, zombies, and war typically serve as the catalysts to humanity's demise. Encountering acts of desperation and senseless animosity as they accompany characters through the post-apocalyptic wastelands, readers consider what it is to be human, how this humanity is challenged at the world's end, and by what means, if any, humanity can be saved. In *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, the Dalai Lama XIV states, "I truly believe that compassion provides the basis of human survival, the real value of human life, and without that there is a basic piece missing."¹ The post-apocalyptic genre presents a world in which compassion is fading and human survival is threatened. A close literary analysis of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Philip K. Dicks' *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Octavia E. Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* (1993), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), reveals the significance of compassion and empathy in the human experience and their contributions to one's humanity. Through imagery, realism, and the reader's imaginative construction of the text, literature becomes a simulation. Experiencing the post-apocalyptic novel as simulation may increase the reader's tendency and ability to feel empathy and compassion.

Keywords: Post-Apocalyptic Literature, Narrative Empathy, Language

1. Introduction

While seemingly a pop-culture phenomenon, the post-apocalyptic novel demonstrates literature's ability to communicate messages about humanity and the human experience. Typically defined by the setting and plot, the post-apocalyptic narrative takes place during or after an apocalyptic event such as a nuclear holocaust, a species-ending plague, a zombie outbreak, or an environmental collapse. However, the literal definition of the term "apocalypse" is not what readers might expect. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the word "apocalypse" comes from the Greek "ἀπό," meaning "off" and "καλύπτειν," meaning "to cover."² Literally defined as "Any revelation or disclosure," the precise definition of "apocalypse" highlights the significance of this narrative genre.³ The post-apocalyptic narrative is a story that takes place after a revelation of some kind. Following a small group of survivors as they try to retain their pre-apocalyptic identities, the post-apocalyptic novel *reveals* important truths about humanity to both the characters within the narrative and the reader.

2. Methodology

A close literary analysis of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Philip K. Dicks' *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Octavia E. Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* (1993), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) demonstrates two ways post-apocalyptic literature reveals important truths about humanity. Narratives in this genre depict future worlds where suffering is great, and empathy and compassion are scarce. Amid scenes of suffering and inhumanity, characters face opportunities to engage in compassion and empathy; however, fear often impedes fellow-feeling responses. The protagonists of the selected texts risk vulnerability and exploitation as they engage in compassion and empathy. What does it mean that these characters expose themselves and risk vulnerability out of concern for others? Their actions may suggest that compassion and empathy contribute to one's humanity.

Viewing post-apocalyptic "stories as simulations," a theory put forth by psychologists Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley in "The Function of Fiction Is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience," explains a second way the post-apocalyptic genre reveals important truths about humanity.⁴ An examination of imagery and diction in the selected novels demonstrates the significance of post-apocalyptic literature's depictions of suffering contribute to narrative simulation. What readers experience in this simulation will vary; however, readers may develop an increased awareness of their shared humanity with others and, as a result, experience emotional growth in which their tendency to feel empathy and compassion for others increases.⁵ By exploring the manner in which readers may respond to literary elements and by examining the elements themselves, the selected novels in this study demonstrate a variety of ways the post-apocalyptic narrative reveals essential truths about compassion and its significance to humanity.

3. Compassion, Empathy, and Sympathy

A simulation experience that results in emotional growth may be the most significant contribution of post-apocalyptic literature as it highlights the importance of compassion in humankind's hope for survival. Mar and Oatley discuss empathic growth as a possible outcome of story simulation. Though not identical, compassion and empathy are closely related. Psychologists, literary theorists, and philosophers alike use the terms empathy, sympathy, and compassion to describe similar ideas. In *Upheavals of Thought*, philosopher Martha Nussbaum details the relationship between the terms "empathy" and "compassion," noting that, though similar, the terms represent distinct emotions.⁶ For example, Nussbaum defines compassion as "a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune," while empathy is the "imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience, without any particular evaluation of that experience."⁷ This study seeks to explore the ways in which empathy induced by narrative simulation may lead to compassion.

4. Literary Background

Written in 1826, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* is one of the earliest novels of the post-apocalyptic genre. The saga spans the pre-apocalyptic to post-apocalyptic period following protagonist and last man on earth, Lionel Verney. Initially "a vagabond shepherd of the hills," Verney chronicles both his life and the death of humanity, marking 2100 as the "last year of the world."⁸ Verney writes of his friendship with Adrian, Earl of Windsor, whose compassionate acts impress Verney so much that he describes him as a "matchless specimen of mortality."⁹ After a plague, violence, and natural disasters decimate the species, Verney alone survives. Longing for a human companion, Verney spends the remainder of his life writing and reflecting on the decrepit state of the world during which the apocalyptic events unfolded and the state of humanity as it slowly deteriorated.

In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, a nuclear world war has nearly destroyed the earth, leaving almost all animal and insect life extinct. By 2021, the majority of surviving humans have immigrated to colonies in space and received an "android servant."¹⁰ Among those who remain on earth are bounty hunters like Rick Deckard and "specials" like John R. Isidore. Specials are prohibited from emigrating because they have been affected by radiation and are considered less than human.¹¹ Rick's job as a bounty hunter is earth-based for it requires that he "retire" any "escaped humanoid robot [that] had killed its master" and fled to earth.¹² However, androids, or "humanoid robot[s]," are not easy to identify because they look just like humans—the telling difference is their inability to experience empathy—therefore, Rick must perform the "Voigt Empathy Test" to determine whether his

target is human or android.¹³ Once a target is identified as an android by failing the empathy test, Rick is lawfully allowed to kill it. In this post-apocalyptic world, empathy is the proof of one's identity as a human. All humans, including specials, who are affected by radiation, can experience empathy, but androids cannot.¹⁴

Set in 2024, Octavia E. Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* finds America amidst political, economic, and social turmoil. It has not rained for six years; once eradicated diseases are taking lives, and neighborhoods are walled off to keep out the "street poor."¹⁵ Young protagonist, Lauren Olamina comments that outside the neighborhood wall, violent acts occur so often that they have become normal.¹⁶ After her community is attacked, Lauren travels across a collapsing American landscape. In addition to the typical post-apocalyptic challenges, such as feral dogs, gangs, looters, and rapists, Lauren is also subjected to feeling the experiences—both good and bad—of those around her due to her hyperempathy syndrome. She views her ability to feel others' pain as both a positive and a negative. Feeling others' pain can be debilitating and puts her life in danger, but she also considers the positive effect of her syndrome when she wonders, "if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?"¹⁷

Cormac McCarthy's nameless father and son duo in *The Road* travel across a post-apocalyptic America where they encounter nightmares such as cannibals, human slavery, and the seeming loss of humanity. Using these encounters to emphasize their role as "the good guys," the father reminds his son that they are responsible for "carrying the fire."¹⁸ The "fire" they believe themselves to be carrying represents the redeeming qualities of humanity, for example, love, hope, compassion, and an understanding of the value of each human life. However, the young son shows an innate sense of compassion for others that defies his father's judgment at times. The son demonstrates empathy and compassion for those who steal from them and those who may pose a danger to their lives. Born after the onset of apocalyptic events, the boy's only moral guidance and social examples come from his father and the stories he tells.¹⁹ The young son points out to his father that while they are "always helping people" in the stories, they do not do so in reality.²⁰ After the father dies, another man and his family invite the son to join them on the road, an act of compassion that echoes the son's behavior throughout the novel.

5. Literary Analysis: Compassion and Empathy in Post-Apocalyptic Literature

Post-apocalyptic literature explores compassion and empathy in relation to the human experience. In *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*, psychologist Dacher Keltner argues, "Compassion is a biologically based emotion rooted deep in the mammalian brain," which he supports by referencing Darwin's claim that "social instincts—[including] instincts toward sympathy . . .—are part of human nature."²¹ Though they may be natural human emotions, empathy and compassion do not always occur naturally in response to the suffering of others. Keltner explains, "Fight/flight tendencies of self-preservation are continually at odds with tendencies to care in the electrochemical flow of our nervous systems."²² Often, when one's health or well-being is in jeopardy, fear and self-preservation challenge empathic responses; Keltner notes, "The content of the mind shifts between the press of self-interest and the push of compassion."²³ The post-apocalyptic narratives examined in this study illustrate how fear and self-preservation can challenge empathy and compassion for others.

Fear precipitates some of humankind's worst behavior; fear of the unknown, the different, and the other are often the foundations of prejudice and hate. For example, fear overshadows empathy and compassion in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, where society fails to recognize the value of each life and a shared humanity with both those who are different and those whom they fear. Mercerism, the new world religion, triumphs empathy and concern for fellow human beings; however, most followers contradict this foundational principal with their treatment of specials. Specials are humans who have been affected by "radioactive fallout," making them "biologically unacceptable [and] a menace to the pristine heredity of the race."²⁴ Society views specials as less than human: "Once pegged as special, a citizen, even if accepting sterilization, dropped out of history. He ceased, in effect, to be part of mankind."²⁵ Believing they will have a negative effect on the gene pool of the human race, society does not extend empathy and compassion to specials; they are prohibited from evacuating to the new world. If empathy is what makes one human, then society's selective empathy for only those whom they do not feel threatened by makes them just as inhumane as the empathy-lacking androids they fear.

In the same way, the father in McCarthy's *The Road* demonstrates how fear can overshadow empathy and compassion to the point of losing sight of another's humanity. Upon finding the thief who stole everything from them, the boy begs his father not to kill the man, and though the father does not shoot him, the man is left humiliated and vulnerable.²⁶ Rather than only taking back their stolen goods, the father demands that the man strip completely—even giving up his shoes—claiming that he is merely doing to the thief what he did to them.²⁷ The boy begs his father to

show compassion and empathize with the man, but driven by fear for his son's life as well as his own; the father fails to recognize a shared humanity. Seeing him solely as a threat, the father leaves the man "Standing there raw and naked, filthy, starving."²⁸ As the father and son walk away, the son continues to cry with empathy and compassion for the thief. Later, when the father tries to console the boy, he tells him, "I wasn't [sic] going to kill him," to which the boy replies, "But we did kill him."²⁹ The boy recognizes a shared humanity with the thief when he tells his father, "He was just hungry, Papa. He's going to die . . . He's so scared, Papa."³⁰ In this example, the father's fear has grown into a blinding hate that prevents him from recognizing his shared humanity. In so doing, empathy and compassion are inhibited, and he risks losing sight of his own humanity.

The son recognizes compassion and empathy as human qualities that are worth saving, and the novel's end suggests that these qualities are important to humankind's survival. When the father dies, another man invites the boy to join him and his family as they continue their journey on the road. The man, who is traveling with a woman and two children, tells the boy, "There was some discussion about whether to even come after you at all."³¹ By inviting the boy to come with them, the man and his family demonstrate the same empathy and concern that the boy exemplifies throughout the novel. Thus, in the end, empathy and compassion save the boy. Before he dies, the father tells the boy that he must "carry the fire," but the boy replies, "I don't [sic] know where it is."³² The father recognizes the boy's innate sense of empathy and compassion and his acknowledgment of a shared humanity with others; he tells the boy, "Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it."³³ The fire that they carry symbolizes human qualities that are worth saving; perhaps empathy and compassion kindle this fire.

The other post-apocalyptic novels of this study likewise explore empathy and compassion as human qualities worth saving, qualities that may contribute to humankind's survival. For instance, in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, as the plague makes its way into England, Adrian, Earl of Windsor, recognizes that the plague and its suffering are unavoidable. He believes the only thing they can do—and the thing they must do—is help those who suffer.³⁴ When Adrian says, "It is not by flying, but by facing the enemy, that we can conquer," it is not a statement of belief in humankind's ability to conquer the plague itself, rather he believes they can retain their humanity through empathy, compassion, and love.³⁵ As Verney explains, Adrian exudes compassion, risking infection to care for the sick and dying by "visit[ing] daily, not only those probably infected by this disease, but the hospitals and pest houses, going near, and even touching the sick."³⁶ Perhaps the most powerful display of empathy and compassion appears when Adrian rides between two warring armies. Verney recalls that Adrian "did not swerve from the bullets that passed near him, but rode immediately between the opposing lines" pleading, "shed not a drop of precious human blood . . . You are dear to us, because you wear the frail shape of humanity."³⁷ Adrian shows an appreciation for each human life, finding value even in the life of his enemy—he recognizes a shared humanity with others and risks his life to encourage empathy and compassion among the few remaining survivors of humankind.

The Parable of the Sower also considers empathy and compassion as human qualities that are worth saving. Lauren accepts the risk of becoming vulnerable when she purposefully engages in empathy and compassion for others. For example, while she understands that her empathy can make her vulnerable, Lauren willingly exposes herself to others' pain when she and her group of survivors rescue two women from a broken-down house.³⁸ Lauren endures sharing the women's pain and notes that the group's compassionate act made them appear weak to others on the road, and therefore, "made [them] targets."³⁹ Perhaps the reader can understand Lauren's actions as a way that she attempts to maintain her humanity. Lauren notes, in this failing world they "might have to rob to survive, and even terrorize to scare off or kill enemies," but she makes it clear through her words and actions that she intends to maintain her humanity when she tells her group, "We'll have to be very careful how we allow our needs to shape us."⁴⁰ Lauren shares her fear of a world where humanity is lost to "people who aren't human any more [sic]."⁴¹ The inhumane appear in nearly every post-apocalyptic narrative; they take the form of cannibals, con artists who take advantage of the weakened state of society, human-slave owners, and perhaps even those who choose to ignore the suffering of others. Lauren wonders at the benefit of involuntary empathy such as hers, suggesting it as an antidote to the plague of inhumanity she sees in her world: "But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people."⁴² Butler's narrative suggests that empathy is an important element in the human experience that may contribute to one's humanity.

Through the course of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, bounty hunter Rick Deckard comes to acknowledge his empathy for androids. He recognizes that even with their differences and the potential danger they pose android lives are valuable. For example, after fellow bounty hunter Phil Resch kills android Luba Luft, Rick tries to make Phil see the value of Luba's life and the senselessness in killing her.⁴³ When Phil refuses to acknowledge Luba's value, Rick's eyes open to the true nature of his species. He realizes that someone who kills androids without feeling, like Phil, is "a menace in exactly the same way [and] for the same reasons" that an android is.⁴⁴ While androids lack the "ability to appreciate the existence of another," thus making them dangerous, humans in this future world prove to be

far more dangerous, for while they possess the ability to empathize, they choose not to.⁴⁵ The extension of empathy and compassion to those who do not or cannot extend it in return is a marker of humanity. By the end of the novel, Rick comes to understand Mercerism for what it truly is—the acknowledgment of value in every life, even the “inconspicuous life” and the “Life which we can no longer distinguish: life carefully buried up to its forehead in the carcass of a dead world.”⁴⁶ *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* invites readers to consider the intrinsic value of each life—even the lives of those whom society considers different, dangerous, or unworthy of empathy—and how this acknowledgment contributes to one’s humanity.

6. The Post-Apocalyptic Story as Simulation

Reading post-apocalyptic literature may produce a simulation experience. The way in which readers experience literature as a simulation is a topic of discussion among literary theorists, psychologists, transhumanists, and philosophers. For example, in *The Story Species: Our Life-Literature Connection*, literary theorist Joseph Gold contends that the human experience is narrative in nature, and thus suggests that in reading literature, “The language narrative simulates the actual life experience because the [reader’s] life experience has already been narrated.”⁴⁷ Similarly, the experience of reading fictional narratives is the focus of psychologists Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley’s “The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience.” The authors suggest that “Understanding stories as simulations can help explain why they provide a special kind of experience. The abstraction performed by fictional stories demands that readers and others project themselves into the represented events.”⁴⁸ In other words, the reader must mentally engage in the narrative to experience it as simulation. When experienced as a simulation, post-apocalyptic literature may cultivate compassion and empathy in the reader.

Narrative simulation is a result of multiple factors. Mar and Oatley mention two ways by which readers may experience the story as a simulation: “Words may evoke something close to direct experiences of referents, or a fictional text may prompt more constructive imaginative processes, which then create an experience that has some of the attributes of actuality.”⁴⁹ Commenting that while it is most likely a combination of the two that produces the simulative experience of reading, Mar and Oatley note it is the imaginative process that allows for an empathic response in the reader.⁵⁰ For example, it is through imagination that readers “project [themselves] into a story world in order to understand what the characters are thinking and feeling.”⁵¹ Similarly, in “The Function of Fiction: A Biological Model,” Joseph Gold explains that readers experience story through “imaginative role-play participation.”⁵² Engaging with fictional characters in this way requires readers to project themselves into another’s perspective through imagination, thus replicating empathy, which, according to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, “involves the capacity to temporarily suspend insisting on your own viewpoint but rather to look from the other person’s perspective, to imagine what would be the situation if you were in his [or her] shoes.”⁵³ The empathic experience in reading fictional literature is significant to this study because it encourages the reader to take the perspective of another in the same way that he or she might experience empathy outside the narrative.

Engaging empathically with fictional characters requires readers to project themselves into another’s perspective through imagination; however, for a reader to relate to the characters and situations, the text must encompass some element of realism. Though one might challenge that post-apocalyptic literature is anything but realistic, Mar and Oatley argue that the science-fiction narrative, like “most fiction[,] strives for realism in the most important aspects of human experience: the psychological and the social.”⁵⁴ The novels analyzed in this study follow realistic characters who display human emotions such as fear, sadness, and a desire to survive, thus making them relatable. While the narrative worlds are set in the future, they are recognizable as representations of society, whether realistically or symbolically. For example, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, specials and androids are outgroups that are considered subclasses of humankind, a perception that enables society to neglect and kill them without feeling. While this display of human behavior is a nightmare, is not unheard of in reality. In *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Jonathan Glover recalls the Jewish Holocaust in which Nazis adopted the perspective that “some people [Jews] are not even human,” which enabled their inhumane treatment of the outgroup.⁵⁵ Drawing connections between the real world and the world of the narrative not only encourages the reader to relate to the characters in the text but also contributes to a meaningful reading experience.

The manner in which the human brain interprets objects and words may contribute to the simulation experience. According to Mar and Oatley, “there are areas in the brain that code for actions and objects regardless of whether they are actually perceived or merely implied by visual stimuli.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the authors propose, the “imagined settings and characters evoked by fiction literature likely engage the same areas of the brain as those used during the performance of parallel actions and perceptions.”⁵⁷ In other words, the mind interprets words and visual depictions in

a similar way as it interprets the actual viewing of the objects the words represent. This theory may explain how post-apocalyptic literature invites the reader to consider compassion and empathy through images of suffering. For example, in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, Verney writes, "I have sometimes saved a deserted infant—sometimes led a young and grieving mother from the lifeless image of her first born, or drawn the sturdy labourer from childish weeping over his extinct family."⁵⁸ According to Mar and Oatley's explanation, the manner in which the reader's brain processes Verney's words is similar to the way it would an actual viewing of the scene, thus making the reader's emotional response a very real experience.

Readers understand that by story simulation they are not truly experiencing the narrative; however, a lived emotional experience may result from cognitive processing of the text. Mar and Oatley report, "it has been demonstrated that similar brain regions are activated both when moving stimuli are perceived and when these same presentations are imagined," which suggests a potential correlation between the way the brain perceives visual depictions of suffering and literary descriptions of suffering the reader constructs imaginatively through the narrative's imagery.⁵⁹ Depictions of suffering fill the pages of post-apocalyptic narratives, presenting characters whose ability to suffer and desire to be free from suffering create realism that may prompt the reader to respond with compassion. Nussbaum lists "deaths, wounds, losses of loved ones, losses of citizenship, hunger, [and] poverty" as "real and general" compassion-inducing stimuli.⁶⁰ Recognizing that "No human being is exempt from such things" may prompt readers to empathize with the sufferer by imagining themselves or their loved ones occupying the place of the suffering character.⁶¹ Imagining one's self or loved ones in the position of suffering depicted in the novel replicates a Buddhist compassion training exercise that may serve to "develop an awareness and respect for another's feelings."⁶² Lauren demonstrates this line of empathic response in *The Parable of the Sower* when she encounters a "young, naked, and filthy" woman on the street.⁶³ Lauren believes the woman is "dazed or drunk," and suggests, "she [may have] been raped so much that she was crazy."⁶⁴ Empathizing with the woman by realizing that she or her family "could wind up like [her], stumbling along, dazed, maybe hurt, sure to attract dangerous attention," Lauren recognizes a shared humanity and moved to compassion she says, "I wish we could have given her something."⁶⁵ Nussbaum explains, "By reconstructing in my own mind the experience of another, I get a sense of what it means for her to suffer that way, and this may make me more likely to see her prospects as similar to my own, and of concern in part for that reason."⁶⁶ Like Lauren, readers may empathize by imagining themselves or their loved ones suffering as the characters do.

In addition to the human brain processing words and perceived objects in a similar way, the author's diction in creating imagery may evoke an emotional response. In "Emotions and the Structuring of Narrative Responses," David S. Miall explains, words have "emotional connotations," and thus, evoke "positive or negative emotion[s]."⁶⁷ For example, Miall lists "kiss, kill, and throw" as "positive, negative, and neutral verbs," respectively.⁶⁸ Referencing "ERP (evoked-response potentials) studies" that examine how quickly readers mentally processed words, Miall notes, "emotional connotations of words, particularly negative connotations, are detected early in [cognitive] processing."⁶⁹ Thus, diction contributes to a reader's emotional response. Mar and Oatley explain that a lived experience is constructed with a multitude of details—more than can be included in a narrative description—and that "As with any abstraction, a literary simulation is a simplification."⁷⁰ Highlighting the significance of "everything included in the story," Mar and Oatley write, "Readers know that if 'it was a dark and stormy night,' not much good will occur; unlike in real life, the weather is never coincidental in literature."⁷¹ For example, early in *The Road*, McCarthy describes the setting with wording such as "Charred and limbless trunks of trees . . . sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles [sic] whining thinly in the wind" and "raw dead limbs of the rhododendron twisted and knotted and black."⁷² Later in the novel, the father and son come to a cannibal house, and the description of what they find recalls earlier imagery; however, McCarthy no longer depicts nature—but humans. Imprisoned in the kitchen cellar, they find "a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt" and others whispering, "Please help us."⁷³

While word choice is significant, the reader's mental construction of imagery may also contribute to the narrative's emotional stimulation. In "Empathy in the Time of Technology: How Storytelling is the Key to Empathy," transhumanist author P.J. Manney explains that narrative fiction "relies on each mind using its personal experience to build its imagination, making it a more intimate, relatable 'vision' with a greater impact on one's empathy."⁷⁴ It may be that the absence of vivid language encourages greater imaginative participation, by which the reader "becomes the co-creator of the story."⁷⁵ Unlike the examined passages from McCarthy's *The Road*, Philip K. Dick uses simple, concise diction when describing the spider experiment in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. The spider experiment begins when John Isidore finds what may be the last remaining spider on earth and carefully takes it to his apartment. However, three rogue androids whom Isidore has become acquainted with, Pris Stratton, Irmgard Baty, and her husband Roy, decide to experiment on the spider to see if it truly needs all eight legs. Though the diction is void of emotional signals, the entire episode spans seven pages, making the reader a captive bystander in the unnecessary torture of another living creature. The episode begins when Irmgard hands Pris a "pair of clean, sharp

cuticle scissors” to perform the experiment.⁷⁶ Intermittently, the narrative switches between the dismemberment occurring in the kitchen and the content of the television broadcast in the living room. The lengthy and uncomfortable tension this creates for the reader echoes the creature’s long, drawn-out butchery. After Pris has “snipped” and “clipped” two of its legs, while “restraining the spider with the edge of her hand,” the narrative switches to the living room scene for nearly a page.⁷⁷ When the narrative returns to the kitchen, Pris has amputated “three legs from the spider, which [now creeps] about miserably on the kitchen table, seeking a way out, a path to freedom.”⁷⁸ A full two pages of text continue without mention of the spider. When the narrative resumes in the kitchen, Pris updates the others on her progress: “‘Four now,’ she said. She nudged the spider. ‘He won’t go. But he can.’”⁷⁹ Roy Baty boasts, “‘I can make it walk,’” holding a lit match “closer and closer, until at last [the spider] crept feebly away.”⁸⁰ The androids chatter leisurely for some time before Pris “cut[s] yet another leg from the spider.”⁸¹ Abruptly, Isidore takes the “mutilated creature” and drowns it—a mercy killing.⁸² This unrelenting depiction of suffering encourages emotional response primarily through the reader’s mental construction of the images rather than the use of descriptive language.

As a result of narrative simulation, an increased awareness of one’s shared humanity with others may contribute to the reader’s emotional growth. Through the presentation of dissimilar others, emotional growth has long been a contribution of narrative according to Nussbaum, who explains, “The Greeks cultivated compassion primarily through drama.”⁸³ Post-apocalyptic literature elicits compassion and empathy much in the same way Greek tragedies sought to evoke emotional response, for both introduce the reader or “spectator” to “the bad things that may happen in a human life,” and in so doing, encourage “concern for others who are suffering what [the reader or spectator] has not suffered.”⁸⁴ Like Greek tragedy, which “asked [spectators] to have empathy with the sufferings not only of people whose lot might not be theirs . . . but also with many whose lot could never be theirs,” Nussbaum states that “Contemporary tragic stories are analogous exercises of extended sympathy.”⁸⁵ Thus, “tragic” post-apocalyptic narratives may encourage empathy for dissimilar others within the reader’s social setting—those with different ideologies, religious beliefs, sexual orientations, or lifestyles—or it could apply to others of different cultures who live continents away. Mar and Oatley propose, “Engaging in the simulative experiences of fiction literature can facilitate the understanding of others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for empathy and social inference.”⁸⁶ As discussed, narrative engagement involves not only textual elements such as plot, imagery, and realism but also reader participation in the form of suspended reality and imagination. Similar to the Buddhist compassion training exercise, Manney suggests, “If you regularly place yourself in the shoes of different characters and experience empathy for them, this recurring behavior cannot but help open up your view of the world and create a more empathetic personality.”⁸⁷ Readers engage in narrative simulation in the same manner—by imaginatively projecting one’s self into the experience of the character(s). Essentially, readers engage in narrative simulation by empathizing, thus practicing, in a fictional world, the recognition of a shared humanity with others.

7. Conclusion

By emotional engagement with narrative characters, literature reveals an important message to readers. According to Gold, it is the reader’s emotional response to literature that delivers this message: “It will repay us to pay attention to what our emotions tell us as we read . . . The goal of reading Literature is . . . to cultivate an awareness of the emotion and what it can tell us about ourselves.”⁸⁸ As this study examines, post-apocalyptic literature highlights the significance of compassion and empathy while opportuning emotional growth and an increased awareness of one’s shared humanity with others. While it sounds ambitious, many scholars contend that literature plays a significant role in humankind’s survival. For example, Gold argues, “the novel is a language model of human behavior, the function of which is to increase human self-awareness, and consequently social awareness, with a view to improving the chances of community survival.”⁸⁹ It may be that stories contribute to humankind’s survival by the engaging readers in empathy with fictional characters; according to Manney, “storytelling . . . is not only the most successful remote means of creating social empathy, but has actually been the engine of social/cultural liberalization and change.”⁹⁰ The narrative simulation of a post-apocalyptic world where depictions of suffering and inhumanity encourage emotional response may serve as a meditation on one’s humanity and a shared humanity with others. The empathy and perspective taking that accompany narrative simulation may lead to an increased tendency and ability to empathize with others beyond the fictional world, and thus, help to prepare the reader for lived experiences that resemble the suffering depicted in the post-apocalyptic story.

8. References

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