



Pre-course activity one: Gender and post-apocalyptic fiction

Task set by Susan Watkins, Professor of Women's Writing at Leeds Beckett University.

In this exercise we will be thinking about reading fiction during the Covid 19 pandemic. More specifically we will be taking a look at post-apocalyptic fiction, particularly by women writers and BAME writers.

Let's start by thinking about the gendered impacts of Covid 19 and lockdown. These have become more obvious as time has gone on. Not only are women disproportionately represented in what we used to think of as 'low-skilled' jobs outside the home – caring jobs that are actually essential to our society – but also within the home as carers for children and elders. Feminists have referred to this as the 'double burden', or what Arlie Hochschild has called the 'second shift', a situation which can only be made worse by pandemic and lockdown. Where some commentators are delighted to see an apparent resurgence in retro ideas of domestic bliss – baking and crafting – during the pandemic, the reality is that there has also been a significant increase in incidents of domestic abuse. It is also the case that there are gendered elements to our attitude to the natural world and the environment that have contributed to the appearance of Covid 19. Our rapacious attitude to plant life and animal life implicitly feminises and degrades the environment, subjecting the natural world to a violent and controlling impulse that views it as there for the taking.

Now let's think about fiction that imagines the end of the world as we know it, or more often the survival of a remnant of humanity after an apocalyptic event, whether that be a pandemic or something else. Why do so many texts that are set in a post-apocalyptic future focus on men who are trying to survive, trying to protect women and trying to rebuild things the way they were before? Why is there so much emphasis on men's nostalgia for the world before things changed? In popular cultural treatments of apocalypse – from (in film) *I Am Legend*, *The Book of Eli* and *Mad Max Fury Road*, to television programmes such as *The Walking Dead* – there are few viable alternatives to this masculinist narrative, which we can see in novels like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* also.

My fascination with post-apocalyptic fiction and culture started when I was researching the work of Margaret Atwood, but Atwood is only one of many contemporary women writers who offer us different ways of imagining a post-apocalyptic environment. In my research, I argue that contemporary women writers show readers the ways in which patriarchy and colonialism are intrinsically implicated in the disasters they envision, but they offer qualified hope for a new beginning and a different kind of society, culture and literature after an imagined apocalyptic event.

The first of Octavia Butler's two *Parable* novels, *Parable of the Sower*, is a case in point. Published in the 1990s but prescient reading right now, the novel opens in 2024, in a gated community near Los Angeles. The social fabric of US society has been broken by climate

change, economic collapse and privatisation of civic structures. The protagonist and narrator of *Sower* is Lauren Oya Olamina, a young African American, who is a *hyperempath*, or 'sharer', able to experience the pain and pleasure of others. Her gated community is threatened by the world outside, which includes a poor and starving underclass. Over the course of the novel Lauren gradually develops a new religious belief system, which she calls Earthseed, centred around the idea that 'God is Change' and that humanity's future lies 'beyond the stars'. When her community is destroyed, she travels north with other survivors and founds a new community called Acorn at the end of the novel. The case of Octavia Butler proves, I think, that it is possible to write a different sort of post-apocalyptic novel.

You can find out more about my work by reading my contribution to the LBU Together blog on 'The Best Books to Read in Quarantine':

<https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/lbu-together/2020/04/the-best-books-to-read-in-quarantine/>

You might also like to watch a film of a talk I gave in 2018 on Dystopia, Apocalypse and Contemporary Women's Writing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIbNUGEr4qo>

This can only be a brief introduction so now it's over to you.

Study questions/activities:

1. Make a list of all the books, films, TV programmes you can think of that are about an apocalyptic event and a post-apocalyptic world surviving afterwards. How many of them feature women as the protagonists?
2. What kinds of roles do women usually play in these texts?
3. Find out something about Octavia Butler, the author of *Parable of the Sower* and its sequel, *Parable of the Talents*.
4. Read Gerry Canavan's article about Butler's difficulties writing a third follow-up novel here:
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/theres-nothing-new-sun-new-suns-recovering-octavia-e-butlers-lost-parables/>
5. If you are interested in creative writing, where might you take a third *Parable* novel about Lauren?

Final Comments

If you would like to discuss your ideas / work, or if you have any other questions related to the degree programme or studying at Leeds Beckett University, please contact Dr Rachel Connor, Course Director of BA (Hons) English with Creative Writing, at r.a.connor@leedsbeckett.ac.uk or Dr Emily Marshall, Course Director of BA (Hons) English Literature, at e.marshall@leedsbeckett.ac.uk: or contact one of them on Twitter: @rachel_novelist @EmilyZMarshall. Also, feel free to give the degree page on Twitter a follow too: @BeckettEnglish