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Creating Contended Zombies: Walker Percy's Novel *Thanatos Syndrome* Under Dystopian Lens

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Abstract

The aesthetics of postmodern apocalyptic fiction lies in its ability to trace the traumatic historical memories of mankind. It also addresses the fears and desires of the disintegrated human mind. Postmodern human is bereft of spiritual and social sensibility and is left with the faculty of reason. The cataclysmic failure of man's attempt to reconfigure the wounded humanity/humanism with the help of science is the central subject of Walker Percy's novel *Thanatos Syndrome*. This paper/article attempts a close reading of the apocalyptic tropes and sensibilities that are inherent in the plots of postmodern fiction. Further, it suggests the panacea for the problems caused by absorption of technology and rational abstractions. The dystopian or anti-utopian plot unravels the episodes of mysteries that have affected the psyche of commoners in the 'happy land' in America. Percy uses psychiatry as an instrument to disclose the enigma caused by science and technology in human life. The implications of the novel's plot are discussed in this paper and an attempt is made to throw light on the contrasting bifurcated dimensions of science and its challenges.

Keywords: *Anti-utopia or Dystopia, Apocalyptic fiction, emotions Vs reason, Postmodernism, Science fiction, Thanatos Syndrome.*

1. Introduction

Literary writings aim at exploring the arenas that appeal to the intelligence and imagination of the readers whose personalities differ almost in every aspect. The writers feel the urge to appease each one of their readers. The combination of fictional elements chosen by the writers elicits curiosity and suspense in readers. Such narrations ignite the imagination of the readers and make the story more plausible. The causations of events determine the configuration of the episodes that the writers focus in their writings. They become the objects of scrutiny for the readers to appreciate the literary adroitness. Further, they provide the base for interpreting the behavioral patterns of characters.

Interestingly, science fiction appears to be a genre that infuses principles of science and technology with literary writing. Darko Suvin defines science fiction as "a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the *presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.*"

(qtd. Roberts 1) Set in a different dimension and depicting partially fictitious theories of science, science fiction explains the impacts of the new inventions and the scientific development on the human beings. The narration of unbelievable fictional situations and the presence of materials like a spaceship, a time machine or other devices differentiate the world that the readers inhabit and the fictional world. Also, the inclusion of human elements prevents these literary writings from being completely unbelievable. George Orwell's *1984*, Alduous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* are some of the famous twentieth century science fiction texts. In addition to this, the works of Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury and Robert Heinlein celebrated as well as registered the devastating effects of science upon the human beings. What made their stories successful was the convincing combination of a plot set in the future and the degree of realism.

The great scientific and technological upheavals of the twentieth century have redefined the meaning of science. Science as a discipline seeks to understand, analyze and explain. However, science as an adjective in the noun phrase 'science fiction' denotes the mode of establishing a world in which revelations are based on the essence of modern science. Critical analysis of socio-technological nexus highlights the points of departure from conventional fictional writing and the implementation of alternative features. Cognizance of the influence of science fiction in everyday life inflates the sense of loss. Further, it allows the readers move through ample dimensions that prepare them to be either sympathetic or hostile towards the reconstruction of society using the dogmas of science. However, in the words of Dolan, "Good science fiction is never about building utopia as much as about warning of the dystopias seeded in their attempt." (111) Science fiction is thus a metamorphosis of ethical conducts that man has ignored. Understanding the historical context is crucial in tracing certain aspects of science fiction that have been declared incomprehensible.

During the twentieth century, both the writers and readers became intensely preoccupied with the cultural change culminating from the scientific developments and technological changes. Hostility towards technology started growing and many writers started addressing to the perils of human beings becoming a mere cog or spring in a machine. The anxiety and the high hopes of the machine age gave (in fact is still giving) the hope of leading a civilized life. Writers earmarked their narratives to highlight the drifts in the acceptable norms, thoughts and the vaulting ambitions that were meant to be achieved using the principles of science.

Relatably, Walker Percy, a prophetic writer of the twentieth century, saw science fiction to be a socio-literary experiment. It is the intensity of the warnings that we find in his novels that differentiates him from other writers of his age. His engrossing plots with philosophical ideas enchant the readers who are expected to untangle the mysteries in his works. He writes about the ordinary-yet-inevitable kind of situations that culminate in the destruction of individual and the society. As Linda Whitney Hobson observes, "The reconciliation of change and continuity, of loss and renewal and of science and faith has given energy to Walker Percy's narratives from the beginning of his career to the present, and has made him a persuasive moralist in troubled times." (173) Hobson's observation records Percy as a novelist who examined the spiritual illness of the Western man. The confusions caused by the World War I and the rapid growth of industries, science and technology affected the American vision of life. Percy's concerns are not the events but the reaction of humans to those events. His novels deal with the gray areas of life where "The illusions seem more real than reality itself." (Bewley 225)

Seemingly, Percy's forte is the chaos that arises from the ineptitude of man to discern the boundary between the material and the spiritual and the illusion and the reality. He celebrates science with certain grimness and humor. His farcical representations of scientific developments that have deflated the spiritual substantiate lucidly his ability to dramatize the metaphysics of truth. As Robert Hughes opines, Percy's works are ". . . severe moral judgments on the decadent nature of our science-dominated technological world." (3) Percy, as an "artist-philosopher" (Hughes 4), exhorts the readers to take notice of the befalling apocalypse. He focuses on the, as Jean Baudrillard puts forth, "immortality of endings receding to infinity." (115).

Apocalyptic literature demands greater attention from readers. The word apocalypse refers to revelation. In the words of Richard A. Taylor, “In early Jewish and Christian literature such revelation typically had to do with specific and detailed disclosures of allegedly future events that were thought to lie outside the grasp of unaided human intellect.” (31) While discussing the distinctiveness of apocalyptic literature, Taylor contends that “these writings are characterized at times by . . . [use of] impenetrable mysteries, puzzling symbolism, startling predictions, and foreboding announcements.” (23) Readers are expected to stay away from incorrect assumptions, because the language of the genre is almost always implied. Any reader exposed to apocalyptic fiction for the first time enters a labyrinth – covered by the sense of both amazement and disorientation. Percy focuses on the thin line between benign neglect and complete rejection of science and reassures the vindication of the righteous.

Incidentally, Percy’s *Thanatos Syndrome* is based on the hypothesis of perfecting the worldly life rather than involving in a preparation for an indestructible and euphoric life. The novel carries both scientific surmises and religiously conceived descriptions. Brian Aldiss, in his foreword to a book, has opined that “One of science fiction’s perennial speculations concerns whether or not we can improve morally and spiritually.” (1) It is on this ground Percy’s work is set. The philosophical ideologies in the novel foreground the reconceptualizing of the rationality of being a human. While defining Renaissance Humanism, J. A. Cuddon has noted that “Humanistic attitudes regard man as the crown of creation” and further, quotes from Hamlet: “. . . What a piece of work is man. How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty. In form and moving how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god. The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals.” (601) The sentences quoted here vouch for man as a perfect creation of God, capable of reasoning and making logical enquiries. Cuddon has also stated that it is “Through commitment man provides a reason and a structure for his existence and thus helps to integrate society.” (260) But, with the emergence of scientific inventions and technologies, human beings are bereft of the meaning of their existence. The existential angst has made them “deranged wayfarers” (Desmond 89). The postmodern man, to Percy, is crippled by the perforation that allows pseudo-scientific principles and affects his reliance on the intangible spirituality. Further, Percy identifies postmodern man as someone who lives in a “post-religious age.” (Desmond 89, *Conversations* 294) Percy argues that human beings accept and acknowledge *The Fall* by considering themselves as mere organisms. He insists that transcending such minor position would help man eliminate the malaise afflicting him.

Consequently, the lack of meaning-making structures in human life foreshadows the scarcity of apocalyptic fervor. The new revelatory beginning is not anticipated rather a number of anomalies prevent human beings from the apocalyptic impulses and fears, thwarting the attempts made to realize that the moments of transition are being interpreted into something utterly different. Percy addresses to the nonconformist view that the imminence of death would help appreciate the value of life. “But in a larger sense, the death Percy refers to is the death of the human personality and its main consequence, the deadening banality of life.” (Hughes 14) He is interested in the spiritual catastrophe that has emanated from the postmodern apocalyptic age. He is concerned with the technological augmentation that conceals the universal human nature and the rationale of science that cloaks the appalling toxic side effects. The emphasis is on the exercise of free will and on the dependency of postmodern man on his own reasons to assert his ‘self.’ While discussing the disastrous consequences of the assertion of self, Percy also informs the readers that the extreme outcome of such assertion will result in aberrant human behaviors. Such representations are to be seen as extensions of history and imagination of an epoch.

Evidently, *Thanatos Syndrome* evinces the vicious circle in which humans have got into the postmodern world. The title of the novel is the simulation of the effects that World War I had on the writer. Percy, by underscoring the consequences of the technological manipulations of the human beings, reaffirms the lost values in them. The novel pictures the degraded sub-human living conditions in the anti-utopian Feliciana, a place near Louisiana, and the undifferentiated ruins of technological culture and the rational abstractions of human beings. It can be seen as a critique of the Western idolatry of science and the gullibility of Westerners to perceive science as capable of eradicating human complexities. Percy makes most out of an ordinary American setting and surprises the readers with an

uncompromising attack on science. With these aspects in mind, the article focuses on the binary oppositions – the influence of science and the moral rectitude.

Thanatos Syndrome narrates the story of Dr. Tom More, a psychiatrist, who uncovers the reasons behind the deviant behaviors of his neighbors. The anti-utopian society that Percy pictures seems to be normal when the novel begins. Dr. More is distressed by the unusual behaviors of his patients. In his attempt to unravel the mystery, he finds out that some unregenerate scientists have blended sodium ions into the water supply in an effort to make Felician a ideal place. Their efforts to eliminate neurosis and other distress from their society go vain. On the contrary, people of Felician suffer from some frightful repercussions.

Interestingly, Dr. More, unlike other heroes of Percy, “has very little concern about discovering himself but rather moves actively in the world to change it.” (Hughes 11) Percy directs the attention of the readers, through Dr. More, to the small things and affirms: “Small disconnected facts, if you take note of them, have a way of becoming connected.” (Percy 67) The novel opens with this concept. Dr. More observes a curious flatness of tone in his patients and becomes suspicious about their speech that takes the form of two-or-three-word fragments and their gazes were disconnected. Such anomalous behavior is also seen in Ellen, Dr. More’s wife. The unanticipated changes in her personality during his absence surprise him. He says, “What I keep in mind is her voluptuousness and distractedness. It is odd. At the height of her anger she’s both voluptuous and distracted, preoccupied by something. Her eyes do not quite focus on me.” (Percy 46).

Appropriately, Dr. More attempts to trace what made the people of his neighborhood disoriented. As Baudrillard states, “We absolutely have to know what went wrong at certain point and, hence, explore all the vestiges of the path we have travelled, root through the dustbins of history, revive both the best and the worst in the vain hope of separating good from evil.” (116) Dr. More is involved in such a process and he strives to reaffirm the human qualities that make any ordinary life meaningful. Percy is neither indifferent to nor does appreciate and acknowledge science as salvation. He insists that his readers to use science and technology cautiously. He affirms that science should be seen just as a diligent aid to God’s creation and not as something that can instigate a happy hunting ground on earth.

Apparently, the ideas of being informed about the true status of living and improving one’s life are persistent throughout the novel. Percy emphasizes on the importance of “waiting and watching for signs of God’s grace.” (Hobson 139) He insists that stoicism is more desirable than a life in an artificially created utopian society. Father Rinaldo Smith in the novel can be seen as an extension of Percy, the Shaman. His conversation with Dr. More signifies the hollowness of the late twentieth century

“The smoke was a sign of fire.”

“That is correct.”

“There is no doubt about the existence of fire.”

“True.”

“Words are sign, aren’t they?”

“You could say so.”

“But unlike the signs out there, words have been evacuated, haven’t they?”

“Evacuated?”

“They don’t signify anymore.” (Percy 121)

Percy’s vindications of the new science of human beings and of God’s Will are delineated through the words of Father Smith. Percy is unnervingly honest in his portrayal of Father Smith. Knowing what Dr. More was up to, Father Smith warns him: “There are dangers down there, Tom, You may not be aware of. Be careful.” (Percy 131).

Dr. Comeaux and John Van Dorn are the two people who deceive Dr. More and get him on the government team. Their secrets are disclosed by Dr. More with the help of Dr. Lucy Lipscomb. Dr.

More and Dr. Lucy find that Heavy Sodium (Na-24) from Van Dorn's nuclear power plant is being leaked into the drinking water channel. Those who consumed the water were becoming "docile, distracted, erotic, unselfconscious, and—most important—soulless." (Hobson 143) However, they also observe that the criminal acts were declining. While commenting upon the positive effects of such social engineering, Hobson also posits that the moral dilemma that arise out of the conflict between the good and the evil is balanced in the novel by several hilarious scenes that "make *The Thanatos Syndrome* a provocative book." (143).

According to Percy, resilience in the face of adversity will add purpose to our living and will direct us towards euphoria. To escape the effects of the apocalypse and continue with the utopian desires would actually lead to a dystopian life. Attempts to rediscover the verisimilitude would push us towards simulations that exacerbate our expedition towards a utopian society. Father Smith avers in the novel:

It is because God agreed to let the Great Prince Satan have his way with men for a hundred years—this one hundred years, the twentieth century. And he has. How did he do it? No great evil scenes, no demons—he's too smart for that. All he had to do was leave us alone. We did it. Reason warred with faith. Science triumphed. The upshot? One hundred million dead. (Percy 365)

The scientific idea to put an end to the neurosis leads to degeneration of dogmas of religious faith. Percy wants the readers to remember, as Baudrillard expounds, "...there will be no end to anything, and all these things will continue to unfold slowly, tediously, recurrently, in that hysteresis of everything which, like nails and hair, continues to grow after death." (116) Thus, end to anything should be perceived in terms of its history – what preceded the cause, what lies beyond the effect and the impossibility of ending. End is never truly the end. It is rather a sequence of causality and continuity.

The closing of the novel also shows two people – Dr. More and Mickey – seeking self knowledge. As a psychiatrist Dr. More feels that his duty is to make his patients speak the unspeakable. The novel opens and closes with his patients speak the unspeakable about themselves. However, the closing highly dramatizes the view of "social engineering as a violation of the sanctity of the individual soul." (Hobson 154) What Percy tries to accentuate through his plot is that, in the words of Lionel Trilling, "We must be aware of the dangers which lie in our most generous wishes." (221) It is to be noted that the climax scene, in the words of Hughes, "is rich in its potential not only for violence and disaster but for strenuous sermonizing as well. After all, Dr. More here uncovers the fundamental result of idolatry of science; wildly unrestrained child abuse and the debasement of all normal human faculties." (8) Though the narration of the punishment, where Dr. More overdoses the evildoers with Heavy Sodium, appears to be humorous, it is convincingly enough to denigrate the hypothesis of creating an utopian society free of mental illness. Certain places in the novel appear to be a farce. For instance, Dr. More recognizes the vital role played by science in his life and utters, "I am a failed but not unhappy doctor." (Percy 75) He is pragmatic and is aware of the ways to approach the mysteries of the ordinary reality. He also understands that Dr. Comeaux's idea to save mankind from neurosis is similar to his motivation. However, Dr. More and Dr. Lucy are purposeful and moralistic in their use of technology unlike the other unpleasantly ambitious scientists.

Apparently, Dr. More appears to be matured than how Percy projected him in *Love in the Ruins*. The complexity of the plot and the psychological dynamism of Dr. More project the realist aspects of the novel and Percy has tried his best to individuate Dr. More from all his other characters. Apocalypse in *The Thanatos Syndrome* seems to be a revelatory break-down of the American social identity – especially in the twentieth century. The title of the novel is suggestive of the conditions characterized by a set of associated symptoms of death instincts. As Hobson rightly points out, "The title itself, meaning 'the symptoms producing death,' asks the reader to put his curiosity to work figuring out what the Greek derivatives mean. This is the same curiosity Tom More puts to use in the lab and in front of a computer terminal to solve the mystery of who is robbing his patients of their souls." (151)

The Thanatos Syndrome can be called a satire because it features the dilemmas that the United States would need to take stock of before setting foot in the twenty-first century. Percy implies throughout the novel that denial of distress and death is denial of life. He, through Father Smith, declares that hope alone can save the world. Father Smith while narrating the Miracle of Yugoslavia to Tom says,

. . . if you keep hope and have a loving heart and do not secretly wish for the death of others, the Great Prince Satan will not succeed in destroying the world. In a few years this dread century will be over. Perhaps the world will end in fire and the Lord will come—it is not for us to say. But it is for us to say, she [Mother of God] said, whether hope and faith will come back into the world. (Percy 365)

Dr. More's journey is similar to the journey of Everyman. He navigates through the real world issues like avarice, apathy, uncertainty, hastiness and exasperation and finally arrives at a land where beauty and strangeness are balanced. Percy presents Dr. More, like Everyman, as an ordinary man pushing on his life with God's grace and as a man filled with the quest for salvation.

Evidently, an idiosyncratic mystic-religious connotation embedded in Percy's language is veiled by the lofty idea of transcending the adversities. Percy insists on the importance of fortitude and the futility in running after reasons and logics. Through Father Smith, he avers that the whole system of sign – a signifier with a signified – has collapsed and nothing means the same as it did before.

“It is not a question of belief or unbelief. Even if such things were all proved, if the existence of God, heaven, hell, sin were all proved as certainly as the distance to the sun is proved, it would make no difference, would it?”

“To whom?”

“To people! To unbelievers and to so-called believers.”

“Why wouldn't it?”

“Because the words no longer signify.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the words have been deprived of their meaning.”

“By a depriver.”

“Right. Once, everyone admits, such signs signified. Now they do not.”(Percy 118)

Father Smith addresses the scientific endeavours to be the depriver. He feels that the fascinations of science have removed humans from the proximity of God. Thus, Percy's narrative substantiates the contemporary spiritual muddle that deprives modern man of his hopes to lead even a mundane life.

2. Conclusion

To conclude, social discourse in *The Thanatos Syndrome* is influential in determining the article of faith within a particular social structure – the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Percy gives us a glimpse of the difference between the 'otherworldly' and 'other worldly' events, both of which add a sense of mystery to life. Science fiction “may not be the only moral literature left, but the best of it is that.” (Dolan 112) Percy balances the imagination with familiar sameness so as to perceive the conditions of life in a strangely new world from a revolutionary perspective. The configuration of roles of men and machines is reversed. Such reversal “banishes man into that kind of revealing which is an ordering. When this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing.” (Heidegger 27) In such cases a particular revelation will lead to simulations of further revelations. What makes Percy's revelation valid is his concern towards humanity and the constituents of values and ethics that prevents human from degeneration.

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