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Disaster and Emotion in Richard Matheson's Novel *I Am Legend*

Abstract: This article seeks to examine the emotional impact of disaster in the novel *I Am Legend* (1954) by Richard Matheson, one of the most celebrated writers of science fiction and horror genre in the 20th century. A global pandemic appears to have transformed all people into vampires, except for Robert Neville, the hero, who is immune to the virus. The only human survivor now, he is nightly faced with the massive threat of these infected living and undead vampires, whom the hero kills without mercy day by day, drastically reducing their numbers. While striving to survive at all costs, he tries hard to find a cure for the disease but is finally caught by the living vampires and condemned to death due to his unrestrained violence against them. As the last representative of the 'old society', he must relinquish the Earth to the 'new society', which is now able to keep the disease in check with a pill. Based on a qualitative research, the analysis begins with an introduction into the concepts of disaster and emotion. It subsequently elaborates on a range of emotions and feelings resulting from the catastrophe in the novel: fear and anxiety; sadness and grief; interest and anticipation, with a view to analyzing the hero's capability of managing and regulating his emotions and the others' emotions under psychologically and emotionally distressing circumstances. It is concluded that Neville is not particularly able to effectively manage his emotions, which translates into excessive violence against others. Becoming aware of the consequences of his destructive acts, he accepts his tragic end with courage.

Keywords: *disaster; emotion; pandemic; vampire; virus.*

Introduction

A disaster – natural or human-caused – can be highly consequential on a social, economic, physical and psychological level by adversely affecting a large area of land, destroying dwellings, leaving many people isolated, without resources, causing trauma, and often death. On a more personal plane, the extent

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of emotional harm varies with the individual's self-esteem and his/her resilience.

Disasters occurring on a massive scale, such as pandemics, are extremely destructive and disruptive. In particular, a pandemic, unlike a wildfire, hurricane, or earthquake, enforces segregation and alienation among its survivors, often further psychologically and emotionally aggravating the negative consequences of the catastrophe itself. Marcel Blanchot (1980), in his influential book *Writing about Disaster*, states:

The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact. It does not touch anyone in particular; "I" am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. It is in this way that I am threatened by it. It is in this way that the disaster threatens in me that which is exterior to me – an other than I who passively become other. (1)

When it comes to man-made disasters, humanity has demonstrated that it is capable of the worst: the deaths and destruction of First and Second World Wars were indescribable. In particular, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the view to speeding up the end of the war, brought on devastation beyond imagination. The event led to the perennial nuclear threat rendering the destruction of the world a distinct possibility. In this context, in his article, *Dramatizing and De-Dramatizing the End*, Klaus Scherpe (2000) emphasizes:

Not only has it [world destruction] become producible but, perhaps, even interchangeable: an ecological disaster and the catastrophic developments now underway in genetic engineering are both just as suitable for snuffing out human existence or making it unrecognizable. The producibility of the catastrophe is the catastrophe. (qtd. in Becker 2)

With the COVID-19 global pandemic just recently declared officially over, sci-fi fantasy genre seems more real than ever. In this light, in his article *Imagination in Times of Pandemic...A Mutation towards a "Second Reality"*, researcher R. Elidrissi (2021) poses some poignant questions:

In these times of adversity, what does it take to survive when the world comes crashing down? How do humans stay resilient, manage their growing stress, and somehow navigate through the crisis? More

specifically, how do humans cope with isolation and loneliness in the light of a global outbreak? (1)

Such concerns were raised by Matheson at the beginning of his literary career, with him stating: “My theme in those years [the early fifties] was of a man, isolated and alone, and assaulted on all sides by everything you could imagine” (Winter 42). This way, the vampires’ uninterrupted attack against the only human survivor serves the writer’s intent most effectively.

In raising such grave and topical concerns, *I am Legend* was an immediate success for 27-year-old Matheson. The book was made into three films, namely: *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (2007). Matheson is also credited with being the first writer to have created the urban horror genre, thus removing it from outlandish and settings. In this regard, horror critic Douglas E. Winter (1990) considers Matheson “perhaps the most influential writer of horror fiction of his generation” (38).

A disaster, just like any event or situation, evokes different kinds of emotions in the experiencer. Defining emotions, or *pathê* (*passions*), as “all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, and that are also attended by pain [lupe] or pleasure [hedone]. Such are anger, pity, fear, and the like, with their opposites”, (qtd.in Scarantino 14), Aristotle was among the first theoreticians to have formulated a definition of emotions. He attributed a practical objective to the *Rhetoric* in seeking to help orators with their political and judicial speeches, since public speakers would be more persuasive if they managed to control their own and audience’s passions. In this context, Aristotle stated that “our judgments when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile” (qtd.in Scarantino 15). Elaborating on twelve different emotions, Aristotle examined the kinds of mental attitudes, personalities, and circumstances under which certain passions are felt.

Aristotle and other philosophers or psychologists, such as Descartes, Hume, James, and Freud belong to the traditional view in identifying emotion with conscious feeling, which differentiates emotion from other mental states. Freud (1950) stated: “It is surely of the essence of an emotion that we should feel it, i.e. that it should enter consciousness” (109-10).

Other more modern theory highlights the implicit or unconscious nature of emotion, which entails a lack of awareness of both the stimulus evoking the emotion and of the produced emotion itself. Kihlstrom (1999) makes the

following distinction:

Paralleling the usage of these descriptors in the cognitive unconscious, “explicit emotion” refers to the person’s conscious awareness of an emotion, feeling, or mood state; “implicit emotion”, by contrast, refers to changes in experience, thought, or action that are attributable to one’s emotional state, independent of his or her conscious awareness of that state. (432)

According to this approach, the generation of a certain emotion depends on the individual interpretation of the stimulus. For example, if a person interprets a situation as threatening, then fear is probably aroused. If disapproval is involved, the person is likely to experience shame.

Emotions are complex and varied. Based on stimuli, people experience and elicit numerous emotional feelings such as love, anger, excitement, and the like every day. Emotions can be short-term (e.g. disgust) or long-term (e.g. hatred); noticeable to the observer (e.g. anger) or hidden from them (e.g. anxiety); socially acceptable (e.g. happiness) or unacceptable (e.g. sadness); culturally generally encouraged (e.g. enthusiasm in Western culture and satisfaction in Eastern culture) or generally discouraged (e.g. grief in Western culture and fear in Eastern culture).

Regarding the importance of emotions, in their chapter *Emotion and Adaption*, Lazarus & Smith (1990) emphasize that:

Subjectively, there are few psychological phenomena that compare with emotion. Emotions punctuate almost all the significant events in our lives: We feel proud when we receive a promotion; we become angry when we learn that our homes have been burglarized; we are joyful at the births of our children; and we experience profound grief at the death of someone we love. Furthermore, the emotions we experience seem to strongly influence how we act in response to these events: The joy and pride encourage renewed commitment to advance and protect career and family; the anger motivates us to seek justice and retribution; and the sadness pushes us to seek aid and comfort while coming to terms with our loss. (609)

Researchers generally agree on a list of six primary emotions, namely:

happiness, fear, anger, sadness, surprise, and disgust. They are universally experienced and easily recognized across all human cultures. These basic emotions, in turn, can evoke secondary emotions. For example, anger can evoke shame or elicit fear (if someone gets punished for being angry). Secondary emotions are generally harder to interpret because they relate to an internal, private experience.

The purpose of this article is to examine the generation of various (primary and secondary) emotions, such as: fear and anxiety; sadness and grief; interest and anticipation, elicited by the occurrence of the disastrous pandemic in the novel *I Am Legend*, hypothesizing that emotional regulation by the protagonist is not achieved.

Fear and anxiety

Fear and anxiety are interrelated emotions. While the former is evoked from real danger and can cause anxiety, the latter is elicited from an imagined threat and may also cause fear. Both fear and anxiety are adaptive behaviors which help people to identify threats, ensure their safety and survival. The major difference between fear and anxiety is related to time references. Fear is a response to an imminent or observable danger occurring in the present moment of time, whereas anxiety refers to a possible danger or threat that may or may not occur in the future. Anxiety is considered normal and useful when it helps us stay vigilant, renders us conscious of risks, and encourages us to solve problems. However, if anxiety is intense, frequent, and long-lasting then it can become pathological and maladaptive, turning into a disorder.

Fear can be innate or learned. Two forms of fear that humans are born with are: fear of falling and fear of loud sounds. According to translational neuroscientist S. Norrholm, when people hear loud sounds, they are most likely to adopt a fight or flight response due to “the acoustic startle reflex”. He explained that due to a loud sound “you’re going to duck down your head. Loud noises typically means startling. That circuitry is innate” (qtd. in Kounang, Web). This response signals danger around us.

Fear can be learned through observation, verbal warnings or direct experience, for example when one is attacked by an aggressive dog. By observing others, young children learn to be afraid of snakes, spiders, and the dark. Norrholm associates this kind of fear with evolution: “Back in our

ancestral age (...) young children learned not to pick up snakes and spiders because they're venomous" (qtd. in Kounang, Web). At a later stage, there appear social fears concerning interaction or rejection in different settings, and ultimately fear of death of loved ones and one's own.

In ancient times, people primarily attributed fear of natural disasters to the wrath of gods directed at human beings. Nowadays, though these phenomena are scientifically explained, fear of the elements is still present due to the overall distress and destruction they may cause. Matheson conveys in *I Am Legend* his fear of a biological and nuclear war, which is also highlighted by the novel's protagonist in flashback, as his wife and he speculate that the pandemic could have been brought on by the bombings, resulting into dust storms and mutated insects.

Another type of fear is fear of the Other, which has been salient since time immemorial. It primarily derives from a superiority of *us* or in-group toward *them* or out-group. Belonging to another group, culture or race, the Other is regarded as strange and repulsive, thus to be avoided or fought mercilessly. Fear of the Other is essentially related the fear of the unknown, which, according to the highly influential horror writer H.P. Lovecraft (1927), is: "(...) the oldest and strongest kind of fear (...)" (qtd. in Carleton 11). The reader of the novel *I am Legend* is introduced to this kind of fear from the very beginning. The narrator relates that Neville is protecting himself against *them*. It later becomes clear that *they* are vampires, a byproduct of the catastrophe. Unaware that some of these blood-sucking creatures are comatose infected humans, Neville does not differentiate in his daily slaughter. The nadir is reached with him killing his own wife, Virginia, who returns from the dead as a vampire to kill him. (We learn from the narrator that, following her death from the plague, Neville went against the law which stated that burning the dead prevented the spread of the disease, and secretly buried her body instead).

The incessant nightly attacks by vampires imbue the hero with terror, while rendering his existence literally impossible. While Neville is able to roam around the deserted city by day, once he loses track of time and returns home after sunset, to be met with the crowd of vampires at his front door. Particularly terrifying is the fierce fight initiated by Ben Cortman – his former much-beloved neighbor:

Cortman's body drove into his and almost knocked him down. He fell the

cold, powerful hands clamp on his throat and smelled the fetid breath clouding over his face. The two of them went reeling back toward the sidewalk and the whitefanged mouth went darting down at Neville's throat.

Abruptly he jerked up his right fist and felt it drive into Cortman's throat. He heard the choking sound in Cortman's throat. Up the block the first of them came rushing and screaming around the corner.

With a violent movement, Neville grabbed Cortman by his long, greasy hair and sent him hurtling down the driveway until he rammed head on into the side of the station wagon. (39)

Cortman is the one of the many of his kind who bangs on the fortified door of Neville every night, asking him to come out. Female vampires also try to get him out by sexually luring him.

In what it seems to be a moment of compassion, Neville draws a parallel between these deranged creatures and unscrupulous individuals in politics, unsure who to be more afraid of:

At one time, the Dark and Middle Ages, to be succinct, the vampire's power was great, the fear of him tremendous. He was anathema and still remains anathema. Society hates him without ration. But are his needs any more shocking than the needs of other animals and men? Are his deeds more outrageous than the deeds of the parent who drained the spirit from his child? The vampire may foster quickened heartbeats and levitated hair. But is he worse than the parent who gave to society a neurotic child who became a politician? (26)

Although, by the end, Neville's fear of vampires has abated, he keeps killing them mostly for entertainment. Greatly reduced in numbers, the vampires of the new society fear him immensely and seek his extermination.

Sadness and grief

Sadness is a basic emotion evoked by loss or separation, such as that of an object, job, friend, loved one, or a previous lifestyle. Just like any emotion, sadness can vary in intensity. If the sorrow is deep or intense, then it is commonly identified with grief, especially at the death of someone. Grief is also

more commonly connected with heavy failures or losses. While often used interchangeably, sadness is less obvious than grief. "Sadness is characterized by low physiological arousal, whereas grief is characterized by higher physiological arousal and a propensity to weep" (Huron 59). On the other hand, grief itself can become traumatic if caused by a trauma or catastrophe. In this regard, Abi-Hashem (1999) states that:

when a significant loss occurs as the result of a severe trauma, violence, tragedy, accident, or natural disaster, the survivor's reaction tends to be an amalgam of symptoms. Depending on the situation, the pre-existing conditions, and the nature of the traumatic event, the cluster of symptoms experienced by the traumatized bereaved includes usually elements of post-traumatic stress disorder, clinical depression, acute stress disorder, generalized anxiety, panic disorder, and complicated bereavement reactions. (316)

As the only human survivor, Neville grieves his own situation, the loss of human race, and his family. Through flashbacks, the reader is informed that he first lost his daughter, Kathy, and then Virginia, to the virus. Experiencing the death of his wife twice under catastrophic circumstances, Neville displays a clear condition of traumatic grief when he visits her grave: "[I am] still alive, he thought, heart beating senselessly, veins running without point, bones and muscle and tissue all alive and functioning with no purpose at all" (32). Regarded as a condition of persistent sadness, or mood disorder, depression is typically associated with feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, and self-hostility:

He swallowed the whole glassful at once, head thrown back, whisky running out the edges of his mouth. I'm an animal! he exulted. I'm a dumb, stupid animal and I'm going to drink!
"I'll choke myself!" he stormed. "I'll strangle myself, I'll drown myself in whisky! Like Clarence in his malmsey, I'll die, die, die!" (86)

Depression is particularly aggravated as a result of loneliness. Deprived of human interaction, Neville finds his situation excruciating, with recovery virtually impossible. In their article, *Recovering emotionally from disaster*, Kevin Rowell and Rebecca Thomley (2013) emphasize the great importance of being

supported by loved ones when a disaster occurs:

Social support is a key component to disaster recovery. Family and friends can be an important resource. You can find support and common ground from those who've also survived the disaster. You may also want to reach out to others not involved who may be able to provide greater support and objectivity. (Web)

After about eight months of solitude, Neville's life is a "barren, cheerless trial" (89). While his sexual frustration seems to abate with time, longing for human interaction does not. He "always, in spite of reason (...) clung to the hope that someday he would find someone like himself—a man, a woman, a child, it didn't matter. Sex was fast losing its meaning without the endless prodding of mass hypnosis. Loneliness he still felt" (94).

There are a few distractions that seem to alleviate the killing effect of loneliness and despair: music and intensive reading for the disease; putting graphic artwork on the walls; the appearance of a dog and later of Ruth, an infected female human sent by the 'new society' to spy on Neville's activity. Upon seeing her, his hope of restarting human race revives. However, having been alone for a long time, Neville has become uncomfortable of human presence and cannot create a real bond with her. While Neville is aware that the total lack of human interaction has taken a toll on him, Ruth informs him that, through his mass slaughter, he has transformed himself into a monster.

Interest and anticipation

Interest and anticipation are interconnected emotions. The American psychologist Robert Plutchik, in his wheel of emotions, includes anticipation in the list of eight primary emotions, with interest as its low intensity and vigilance its high intensity. Interest is an intrinsic human trait from the moment of one's birth. Once babies become aware of the environment, they are guided by the desire to explore it and learn. Relating interest to "learning, motivation, and development", Paul J. Silva (2008), in his article *Interest – The Curious Emotion*, emphasizes that: "By motivating people to learn for its own sake, interest ensures that people will develop a broad set of knowledge, skills, and experience" (57). In his previous studies (Silvia, 2005b; Silvia, 2006), he suggests that interest stems from two appraisals: *novelty-complexity* and *comprehensibility*. In other words, for a

situation to be interesting, it has to be new, complex, and understandable. More specifically, the interest in an unfamiliar domain requires one to possess the necessary skills to cope with the challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This advancement of knowledge and skills occurs in the novel, too, as Robert's interest in vampires and the virus increases. The initial information he has about them is based on existing superstitions and B. Stoker's *Dracula*, whereby one is informed that vampires are horrible blood-sucking creatures afraid of sunlight, mirror, cross, garlic, and that they meet death only by insertion of a stake into their heart. With a scientific background himself, Matheson suffuses the plot with technical savvy on vampires, disputing the above classic stereotypes. While in other works of fiction the reason why sunlight kills vampires is never properly explained, in *I Am Legend*, the vampire is a result of bacteria/germ – not magic – so it is logically destroyed by exposure to the sun. Roberts points out: "Strong sunlight kills many germs rapidly ..." (74).

The classic explanation that vampires were invisible in mirrors is untrue and magic for Neville. To him, rather, the mirror has a psychological impact by tremendously straining the vampires' mind once they see their image of the monster they have become. Also, concerning the belief that sight of cross helped repel vampires, Neville thinks that this could psychologically affect only those vampires that once believed in Jesus, not non-Christians or non-believers. Neville rightfully states:

"Why should a Jew fear the cross?" he said. "Why should a vampire who had been a Jew fear it? Most people were afraid of becoming vampires. Most of them suffer from hysterical blindness before mirrors. But as far as the cross goes—well, neither a Jew nor a Hindu nor a Mohammedan nor an atheist, for that matter, would fear the cross." (126)

Likewise, as regards the role of garlic against vampires, Neville scientifically explains how it acts as an allergen to the infected vampires, causing an adverse response by their organism, unlike that of humans:

He had learned over a year before that garlic was an allergen to any system infected with the *vampiris* bacillus. When the system was exposed to garlic, the stimulated tissues sensitized the cells, causing an abnormal reaction to any further contact with garlic. (120)

Neville also expands the classic idea of killing the vampires by insertion of stake into their heart. He tells Ruth that an open wound, anywhere in the body, causes death because “the bacillus is a facultative saprophyte. It lives with or without oxygen; but with a difference.” (135). He further remarks that an open wound makes the germ become aerobic (i.e. it draws in oxygen), which disrupts the symbiosis with the system and eventually kills the vampire.

Anticipation is an emotion involving pleasure or anxiety, while expecting something to happen. In other words, anticipatory feelings can be positive (hope and excitement) and entail some form of expected reward. Or they may be negative (fear and anxiety) and foresee threat. While distrustful and vigilant of Ruth from the beginning, Neville eventually dashes her hopes when insisting on checking her blood in the absence of an effective cure. Fearing for her life, she knocks him out by hitting him with a wooden mallet on the head. However, feeling sympathetic of his situation, she leaves him a note after her escape, urging him to run away from his home because the members of her society are coming to execute him soon. Unable to cope with loneliness any longer, he fights the enemy in his house and, when incapable of overpowering them, prior to his public execution, he takes the deadly pill that Ruth had given to him.

Conclusion

A disaster is a catastrophe which affects many aspects of people’s lives: their social and economic state of affairs; their marital and familial situation; and, in particular, their physical and mental health. Recovery from such distressful circumstances becomes especially hard when individuals are faced with total isolation and incessant threat, as it is the case in *I Am Legend*.

The calamitous event of the vampire pandemic evokes in Neville a multitude of emotions and responses: fear, anxiety, sadness, grief, depression, despair, and anger on the one hand, and interest, enthusiasm, and hope in trying to find a cure for the disease, on the other. Despite his predicament, the hero is determined to survive, while managing to establish a sort of daily routine. However, being exposed to uninterrupted violence and unending loneliness, Neville becomes excessively violent himself and can no longer regulate his emotions. By the novel’s end, with his sanity greatly impaired and aware of his inhumanity and transformation into a monster, Neville anticipates his tragic end as the last representative of the legend that was once called the human race.

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