Apocalyptic Misanthropy and the 'Fall' of Modernity in Mid-Twentieth Century American Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

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Abstract

This article critically examines misanthropy and anti-modern sentiment in post-apocalyptic fiction. Focusing on Pat Frank's 'Alas, Babylon (1959)', it explores the misanthropic potential of apocalyptic fantasies that imagine the end of the world as both a clean slate and a deserved punishment for a sinful, 'fallen' humanity. The novel's conservative outlook frames the apocalypse as an opportunity to return to idealised ways of life, evoking biblical themes and misogynist narratives to underscore its engagement with misanthropy. Sin and moral excess are identified with a mid-twentieth-century modernity, which precipitates its own downfall. These misanthropic longings map on to the nature-culture divide prevalent in modern, Western culture, where nature is depicted as a pastoral idyll, which is opposite to technological modernity. Through an examination of these misanthropic constructions, this article highlights the ways post-apocalyptic fiction more generally reflects and shapes societal anxieties about modernity, the natural world and human fallibility. Finally, it challenges these misanthropic paradigms by discussing their narrow conception of power and responsibility and their incapacity to imagine meaningful futures.

Introduction

This article examines Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* (1959) to explore how this post-apocalyptic novel represents apocalypse and what this reveals about the novel's evaluation of mid-century American society. *Alas, Babylon* tells the story of a community in the fictional rural town of Fort Repose, Florida. After a nuclear war erupts between the United States and Russia, the town's survivors band around the novel's protagonist, Randy Bragg. They face the challenges of being cut off from a devastated US-America and work to build a thriving community, while Randy evolves into the leader of both his family and of the town. Written in the mid-twentieth century, at a time when the brutality of technological modernity emerged in unprecedented ways—most notably in the creation of the nuclear bomb—*Alas, Babylon* emerged from and contributed to a new apocalyptic imaginary. This makes

the novel a salient case study for examining anti-modern and misanthropic constructions.

Concepts of apocalypse, with their associated destruction, evoke complex emotions. While the apocalypse's immense scale of suffering and horror can be deeply unsettling, apocalyptic fantasies often convey anticipation and longing. The Judeo-Christian ideas that shape Western conceptions of apocalypse prime audiences for awe and anticipation of a final judgement, in which evil is punished and the virtuous and faithful are rewarded. Both the concept and term 'apocalypse' emerge in Christian texts and theology. As Kirsten Thompson (2007, p. 3) notes, the term derives from the Greek *apokalypsis*, broadly meaning to "uncover or disclose". As Stephen O'Leary summarises, apocalypse in the original biblical sense is therefore:

> [a] discourse that reveals or makes manifest a vision of ultimate destiny, rendering immediate to human audiences the ultimate End of the cosmos in the Last Judgment. (O'Leary. 1998, pp. 5–6)

In the Bible, apocalyptic texts include the Book of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah in the Old Testament and chapters from the Gospels of Mark and Mathew in the New, alongside, most famously, the Book of Revelation (Zamora, 1993, p. 2). Zamora (1993, p. 10) crucially highlights that apocalypse is eschatological; "it is concerned with final things, with the end of the present age and with the age to follow", which has enabled a shift in meaning this article will later discuss in further detail.

These origins of apocalypse manifest in *Alas, Babylon*. Drawing on Christian ideas of sin and divine punishment that shape Western apocalyptic thought, the novel presents modernity as corrupt and idealises a pre-modern, rural past. Through this alignment of Christian apocalypticism and conservative nostalgia, *Alas, Babylon* constructs a moral vision that celebrates destruction as a means of renewal. In the novel, Christian ideas serve to justify an apocalyptic event as a deserved punishment for a sinful humanity. Annihilation is morally cleansing, setting the foundations for new and improved societies. The article seeks to evaluate how *Alas, Babylon* depicts apocalypse as a blank slate and cleansing event—a sacrifice for a better future. In doing so, it centres the

misanthropy and political implications inherent in treating annihilation simultaneously as a punishment and an opportunity for renewal. Critics such as Richard Schwartz (2006, p. 410), Jeffrey Porter (1993, pp. 41–42) and Brent Bellamy (2021, pp. 2, 46–47) have recognised the reassuring fantasy of the apocalypse as a clean slate in Frank's novel. Porter (1993, p. 41) critiques Frank's tendency to prioritise pastoral fantasy over the significance of nuclear war. While these discussions recognise key dynamics of the narrative, Frank's reassuring apocalyptic vision also creates political longings and an accompanying misanthropy that remain underexplored. Furthermore, pre-existing discussions of the novel's representation of apocalypse have not examined in detail how Christian concepts of apocalypse manifest in the novel in order to create a specifically conservative and pastoral apocalyptic fantasy.

This article seeks to expand existing discussions by examining the consequences of such apocalyptic fantasies arguing that, more than merely being reassuring, *Alas, Babylon* perpetuates a deeply anti-modern and conservative instinct through its close alignment with Christian apocalyptic narrative. The novel's use of Christian ideas of sin and divine punishment serves to villainise modern society and celebrates a mythical pre-modern, pure past, which helps to construct a conservative and misanthropic fantasy that recasts annihilation as a hopeful act of renewal. This article further examines the political and ethical consequences of such misanthropic apocalyptic fantasises. Finally, this article considers the wider implications of *Alas, Babylon*'s targeted misanthropy and concludes by considering how they highlight a narrow view of responsibility, privilege and change in apocalyptic fantasies of this type.

Apocalypse as a Clean Slate

In *Alas, Babylon*, nuclear apocalypse provides a blank slate that allows the survivors to build more rewarding lives. Many contemplate how their lives and those of their family members have improved since losing modern society. The protagonist, Randy, is a key example of this transformation. The novel traces his journey from an alienated alcoholic, womaniser and failed politician to an assertive leader of his family and his community. Qualities once overlooked, such as his natural survival skills and talent for leadership, emerge through crisis. Johannes Kaminski (2021, p. 916)

describes how Randy typifies male protagonists in survivalist narratives who: "stand out for their physical strength, social cooperation and spiritual tranquillity" amid post-catastrophic conditions. Randy 'hardens' through adversity and matures into a respected leader, who displays Christian, masculine virtues. Other characters note this change, with one remarking: "You're tougher. You're not the same Randy. I guess you're growing up" (p. 200). This stands in contrast to the way his girlfriend describes him earlier in the plot as "vegetating" in Fort Repose rather than being a true "man" (p. 52). His moral growth is paralleled by physical improvements, as Randy feels that he benefits from the labour required to sustain the community's harvests and supplies. Randy describes feeling "leaner and harder, and truthfully, [he] felt better than before The Day [of the bombs]" (p. 178). He is not the only character to experience this beneficial effect. His prospective father-in-law, initially portrayed as senile and unassertive before the bombs were dropped, is later described as "drop[ping] years as well as weight" (p. 182). Through such depictions the novel makes clear that the destruction of mid-century American society has improved the lives of its characters.

The novel's resentment of modernity becomes apparent here. As the characters flourish under post-apocalyptic conditions, Frank portrays modern society as an obstacle that had hindered their happiness. Their new lives are depicted as a return to a simpler way of life: a pre-modern and pre-electricity existence linked to a vague, 'better', American past. The novel continually emphasises a temporal disruption and stripping away of modern progress. Randy remarks that North American civilisation has returned to "the Neolithic Age" or at least regressed a few centuries (p. 143). While the protagonists gradually recover a mode of living that they associate with their grandparents' generation, they stop short of recovering contemporary amenities and comforts. The novel's community eschews contemporary invention and embraces a nostalgic past, discovering the value of other items, such as their ancestors' writings, shaving sets and sewing machines (pp. 298–299). *Alas, Babylon* thereby demonstrates how post-apocalyptic fiction, as Bellamy notes,

> treat crisis as an opportunity and encourag[e] an understanding of history that […] seeks a return to the way things were. (Bellamy 2021, p. 2)

Furthermore, this process of returning to "the way things were", to expand on Bellamy's observation, lends itself to a distinctly anti-modern and conservative fantasy.

The temporal reset also reestablishes traditional gender roles. While the men find fulfilment in agrarian labour, the women take on conventionally feminine tasks such as cooking and nursing. Elizabeth, Randy's eventual wife, exemplifies this change. She is an educated woman with a major in psychology (p. 219) and initially appears to embody the "strong, rational, articulate, independent, emotionally restrained, professional" woman whom Schwartz (2006, p. 418) identifies as idealised in Frank's fiction, pointing to potential feminist tones within the novel. However, as Schwartz himself notes, while the narrative certainly prizes strength and restraint in its female characters, the domestic roles performed by women in the community place restrictions on any advocacy for women's greater autonomy. The novel commends Elizabeth's intellect and education, but her ultimate post-apocalyptic fate is to become Randy's supportive wife and to bear his child, taking on a purely nurturing role (p. 259). Her trajectory reinforces conservative gender roles, even if there are potential feminist undertones. This highlights an alternative, underexplored and less charitable reading of the novel's conservative approach to gender roles.

The community's librarian, Alice, further voices the novel's anti-modern themes. Prior to the nuclear disaster, her library was largely deserted and underfunded. She attributes this to "distractions" such as televisions, which she calls "mass hypnosis" (p. 186). After the community is deprived of modern amenities, the library becomes a social hub. Alice reflects, "it was strange […] that it should require a holocaust to make her own life worth living" (p. 186). Beyond her personal new-found meaning, this realisation implies that by re-embracing books as resources, the community has returned to a better time. A society that values traditional, physical knowledge has replaced a society 'polluted' by distractions, and therefore one which was intellectually less meaningful.

It is worth noting that in contemporary conservative politics, libraries are an under-valued and stifled place of learning and community, frequently persecuted through censorship and book-banning (Jaeger *et al.*, 2023, p. 1). However, the novel's depiction of the library does not engage with these contemporary political concerns on this level, instead framing

the library in a contrast between pre-electrical past and a 'polluted' modernity. Accordingly, the novel succeeds in constructing an anti-modern and conservative fantasy around this public space through eschatological apocalyptic narrative, which must portray the destroyed modern time as degraded and corrupted.

The novel further enhances these associations between modernity and degradation through Elizabeth's reflection on humanity's modern condition, which occurs in the context of a conversation about vaccines and modern medicinal protections:

> We were born with silver spoons in our mouths and electric dishwashers to keep them sanitary and clean. We relaxed, didn't we? What happened to us? (p. 230)

Elizabeth explicitly articulates that humanity has softened due to modern amenities, and that this is a decline, a 'relaxation' from a pre-modern existence. The privileges which supposedly make humans 'soft' or degrade their condition are associated with electrical appliances, cementing the novel's association between electrical modernity as a human fall from grace.

Misanthropic Apocalypticism and Christian Symbolism

Alas, Babylon heavily incorporates Christian ideas and themes to depict apocalypse sympathetically, in its justification and rationalisation of the aftermath of the bombing of the US. Biblical tradition lends nuance to the concept of apocalypse. The origins of the term 'apocalypse' from the Greek, denoting prophecies of the final judgement, have already been discussed. However, Zamora (1993, p. 1) notes that "our modern sense of apocalypse is less religious than historical", often referring to nuclear, ecological or demographic "events of recent history" that lay bare our capacity for self-destruction. Thompson (2007, p. 3) accordingly highlights the multi-faceted dimensions of apocalypse, arguing that while popular conceptions commonly conflate apocalypse with "doomsday, disaster, catastrophe, and terminus", the apocalypse carries "dialectical meanings" of revelation, triumph, order and the millennium (Thompson, 2007, pp. 3–4). The Christian tradition imbues Western apocalyptic fantasies with the connotations of positive transformation and anticipation, as reflected in

post-apocalyptic fiction. In his article on Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957), Greg Garrard details how Christian apocalyptic visions draw on punishment and transformation:

> In Christian belief, destruction was a necessary part of God's transformation of reality, a prelude to the New Jerusalem in which virtue would once and for all be rewarded and sin punished […]. For all its violence, apocalypse deals in consolations: the revelation of truth and the final triumph of good over evil. (Garrard, 2011, pp. 394–395)

Frank similarly depicts the apocalypse as an opportunity for renewal and transformation, but *Alas, Babylon*'s apocalyptic misanthropy further draws on Christian ideas of sin, virtue, punishment and reward.

This is evident in its intertextual use of the biblical story of Babylon and in the Christian morality that influences its characters. "Alas, Babylon" is a code phrase used by Randy's brother to warn him of the impending nuclear war, recalling sermons from their childhood (pp. 14–15). The phrase is also later used by a preacher while describing the nuclear bomb disaster as foretold (p. 150) and establishes a link between Babylon, deserving of divine punishment, and the US. The sermon evokes *Revelation* 18:10, which refers to Babylon as a "mighty city" awaiting its divine judgement because it has "fallen" (*Rev.*, 18:2) and "her sins have reached unto heaven" (*Rev.*, 18:5).

In the Bible, Babylon evolved from the historical empire that enslaved Israel into a symbolic figure for moral corruption that invites divine judgement. The 'fallen' Babylon is destroyed through and purified by apocalyptic fire, as it is "utterly burned" (*Rev.*, 18:8), which presents a parallel to nuclear fire and annihilation. Frank's invocation of the Babylon of *Revelation* places modern American cities, such as Miami, Orlando and Washington D.C., which are targets of nuclear destruction, as manifestations of sinful Babylon. As Schwartz (2006, p. 143) points out, Miami is destroyed after having "been compared with ancient Babylon as a decadent, licentious center of sin". Through these biblical comparisons, the novel implies that cities, as emblems of modernity and sites of excess and sins, are deserving of their apocalyptic fate and that their destruction fulfils the prophecy of *Revelation* (Rev. 17–18). In turn, the novel invites a

comparison between contemporary America and Babylon, as bastions of power, wealth and human hubris which incur just punishment.

Claire Sponsler (1993, p. 255) comments on the dynamic between the urban and the rural, highlighting that Frank's story features two distinct spaces: relatively "unscathed rural or suburban outposts" like Fort Repose, versus "the contaminated zones of former cities". The modern cities are wiped out, "seemingly with good riddance". Though neither Schwartz nor Sponsler observe this directly in their discussions, the division between cities and rural spaces amplifies the narrative's misanthropic and anti-modern fantasy. 'Purer' rural spaces gain the opportunity to rebuild new and improved societies, whereas urban spaces must endure the deserved apocalyptic punishment incurred by a sinful modernity.

This mirroring of Christian apocalypse extends to the novel's treatment of characters, whose fates are frequently divided along moral lines. Randy, whose journey frames the story, embraces Christian and conservative values in several ways. For example, he transitions from a womaniser to a married man and increasingly values faith and religious practices. Throughout this journey, he demonstrates Christian virtues, such as being a good Samaritan (p. 98). In contrast, characters who display traditional Christian vices are punished. A key example is Porky Logan, the town's elected politician. Previously described as opportunistic, he accumulates heavily irradiated precious metals and jewellery, looking to sell them and gain wealth. The radiation causes his death. He is punished for his greed, while further representing a modern, corrupt establishment.

Rita, a promiscuous woman and Randy's former flame, redeems herself by selflessly lending her truck and petrol to Randy, as well as relinquishing the irradiated jewellery, which she acquired from Porky Logan in exchange for supplies. However, she is permanently marked by an irradiated ring, which leaves a black mark symbolically brandishing her for her vices (pp. 202–205). This mark is an intertextual link to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), in which a similarly sexually deviant must wear a mark (a scarlet letter 'A'). It underscores the novel's perpetuation of conservative gender roles. Rita is contrasted with Elizabeth, who, despite her modern and emancipated education, is portrayed as a chaste and reliable companion for Randy. Unlike Rita, with "an annulled high school marriage and an abortion behind her" (p. 198), Elizabeth does not reveal a sexual

history and expresses her desire for marriage early in both the narrative and relationship (p. 52). Elizabeth becomes Randy's wife and the mother of his future children, through Christian ceremony. As mentioned above, Randy's journey is one that turns towards Christian values, and the female characters reflect that trajectory: Rita, associated with vice, is a marker of his hedonistic past, whereas Elizabeth, a devoted wife, embodies his virtuous present and future.

By aligning characters with Christian virtues or lack thereof, the novel mirrors how the Christian apocalypse provides catharsis "in which good and evil will finally receive their ultimate reward or punishment" (O'Leary, 1998, p. 6). The fallout of nuclear annihilation functions as punishment for the sinful, while allowing the virtuous survivors to rebuild. Christian morality and Social Darwinism unite here, as it is 'natural agents', such as radiation, that weed out both the morally and physically weak and the sinful. Through this justified suffering, the apocalypse becomes:

> a […] moral cleansing agent capable of enabling the hopelessly misguided human race to clean the slate and begin anew. (Schwartz, 2006, p. 410).

The depiction of nature as a corrective force and integration of Christian themes targets modern society, portrayed as fallen and corrupt. In *Alas, Babylon*, the destruction of this sinful modernity allows a reconstituted community to emerge, reflecting the moral and restorative logic of the biblical apocalypse. It parallels *Revelation*, where 'a new heaven and new earth [emerge], for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away' (Rev. 21:1). Following the final judgement, humanity regains close communion with God as the New Jerusalem descends (Rev. 21:1–25). Similarly, the survivors in Frank's post-apocalyptic world reconstruct a morally discipled community, which suggests a new beginning after the destruction of a corrupt world.

The vision of biblical apocalypse resonates in *Alas, Babylon*, where nuclear war is not only a catastrophe but a morally corrective event. By presenting the nuclear annihilation of large parts of the United States as a sacrifice that enables a return to a better past, *Alas, Babylon* frames apocalypse through a misanthropic lens. It rationalises destruction not only through its disdain for modernity but by drawing on nature and Christian

morality to portray the apocalypse as a deserved and necessary, corrective event. This resonates with the use of the term 'nuclear holocaust', as the word holocaust originally describes "a sacrifice completely consumed by fire, and thus a perfect sacrifice" (Livingstone, 2013, p. 141). Accordingly, this also mirrors the punishment of Babylon through fire in the Book of *Revelation*, as previously mentioned. Apocalyptic fire purges the corrupt, allowing for a better future.

Nature becomes a further agent of this purifying sacrifice, echoing the moral logical of Christian apocalypse in which suffering and judgement purge the sinful and allow the virtuous to rebuild. Frank uses nature to justify suffering by alluding to social Darwinism, presenting natural challenges and hardships as forces that strengthen humanity and correct the mistakes of modernity. The narrative follows characters portrayed as physically and morally strong enough to withstand the challenges of life post-nuclear holocaust. The differing fates of Elizabeth's (who becomes Randy's wife) parents demonstrate this clearly. While her father regains strength by trading modern physical comforts for agrarian labour, her diabetic mother dies early in the narrative due to a lack of insulin. While this may seem a tragic yet logical consequence of an apocalyptic situation, the novel's repeated references to Darwin's theories suggest a different interpretation. Characters frequently allude to the idea of 'survival of the fittest' and natural selection. Randy, for example, states: "the strong survive […] that's the way it's going to be" (Frank, 1960, p. 175). Natural conditions for survival become a conservative ideological force, returning humans to 'traditional' conditions and gender roles. Nature thus creates a stronger and more resilient human community, reinforcing the novel's misanthropic and morally corrective version of the apocalypse.

By no coincidence, those who are physically weak, such as Elizabeth's mother, are associated with the comforts of modernity and shown as lacking moral fortitude in the face of disaster. When Randy warns her of the upcoming war, Elizabeth's mother dismisses the subject as "horrid" and refuses to consider it, unlike her husband, who is able to face the possibility and accordingly later develops into a stronger man (pp. 74–75). This example of 'weakness' exemplifies how, as Schwartz argues, the novel "prize[s] dispassionate reason and deplore[s] excessive, counterproductive sentiment" (2006, p. 410). For example, while Elizabeth's mother is

depicted as fragile for being emotionally overwhelmed by the prospect of war, Elizabeth herself is shown as strong for showing little grief upon her mother's passing (pp. 173–174). Similarly, Elizabeth's steadiness and constant demonstration for rationality stands in contrast to Helen, the wife of Randy's brother. Helen, in contrast to Elizabeth, frequently demonstrates her emotions and needs to overcome emotional or irrational outbursts, such as an incident in which she mistakes Randy for her dead husband (pp. 218–219). As the perceived superiority reason over emotion has inherent gendered associations, which emphasises the novel's devaluation of qualities deemed 'feminine' here. Strong emotion, traditionally seen as feminine in Western societies, must be rejected in favour of masculine reason, even by the women who carry out traditional female roles. The inability of Elizabeth's mother to demonstrate dispassionate reason condemns her to the fate of the 'weak', compounded by her reliance on modern inventions, specifically insulin.

Similarly, Fort Repose's hotel guests, who were staying there when the war began, fail to accept the reality of disaster and clamour for modern comforts (p. 159). Many of them later die in a fire that breaks out due to the hotel residents' ignorance, which the town doctor describes as "inevitable" (p. 160). The fire thus becomes another corrective natural agent, embodying the cleansing role of fire. In contrast, it is the characters who return to working closely with nature who rebuild the community. This creates the sense that nature eliminates those the novel perceives to as mentally, morally or physically weak to correct for an overly bloated modern society. Human suffering is justified as nature selects the strongest members of the community and sets humanity on track to build a better existence. The town doctor makes this explicit:

> It is said that nature is cruel. I don't think so. Nature is just, and even Merciful. By natural selection, nature will attempt to undo what man has done. (p. 215)

This statement implies that through modern inventions, humans have strayed from a purer existence and disrupted nature's ways. The suffering of the community becomes a necessary sacrifice for steering humanity to returning to 'the way things were'.

Apocalypse and the Return to Eden

Alas, Babylon constructs a pastoral fantasy to convey its anti-modern depiction of apocalypse as a form of renewal. The novel's use of nature as an idyllic, but neglected, place of plenitude underlines the resonance of Christian themes in the novel. Garrard (2012, p. 42) observes that: "Genesis 3, the story of Man's fall, is essentially an elegy of lost pastoral bounty and innocence". By being expelled from Eden, Adam and Eve forsake a state of harmony with nature, as well as their immediate and intimate communion with God. As Garrard describes, the pastoral has many meanings. However, a crucial form involves idealisation of existences close to nature. Crucially, nostalgia is central to the pastoral as a general concept (Garrard, 2012, p. 41). That nostalgia reflects a longing for a lost Edenic, innocent and 'pure' nature. These connotations inform the pastoral vision in *Alas, Babylon* and shapes the novel's portrayal of a post-apocalyptic community seeking renewal through a return to nature.

Alas, Babylon contrasts the pre-annihilation reliance on cities with a return to rural self-reliance, aided by a bountiful nature. The pastoral imagery contrasts the urban and the rural, associating the latter with moral renewal. Fort Repose, a rural community, stands in contrast to the 'sinful' and destroyed cities of Miami, Orlando and Washington. Laura Ciglioni (2021, p. 996) connects the novel's idealisation of rural spaces to the pastoral, describing how it "can be read as a form of criticism directed at mass-society, in particular at the hypertrophy of American cities". She further points out that concern over urban growth was widespread in years after the Second World War (late 1940s to early 1950s), which contextualises *Alas, Babylon*'s nostalgia for small-town and rural life.

Humanity's 'fall' from grace, just as Adam and Eve did, which incurs the comparisons between the biblical Babylon and modern American cities, which have similarly 'fallen' to sin. The destruction of inhumane and immoral cities allows the rural survivors to build a new Eden, through a pastoral idyll. This demonstrates how post-apocalyptic stories suggest "that after a world-altering event, the only thing to look forward to is the possibility of a new Eden" (Bellamy, 2021, p. 57). The apocalyptic blank slate allows not only a return to the past, but also a return to a pre-lapsarian past. This once again mirrors the Book of *Revelation*, in which, as Zamora (1993, p. 12) described, following the final judgement "the faithful will

enter a timeless realm of perfection, described metaphorically in *Revelation* as the New Jerusalem". In *Revelation*, the apocalypse culminates in a restoration of an Edenic "new heaven and a new earth" (*Rev.*, 21:1), in which humanity regains their close communion with God, who will "dwell with them" (*Rev.*, 21:3). *Alas, Babylon* echoes this sense of renewal through a secular pastoral fantasy. The survivor's restored connection with the natural world evokes an Edenic ideal of innocence and order, even without a divine presence.

As mentioned above in relation to Social Darwinism, the novel appeals to natural laws and conditions as purifying and facilitating rebuilding. Rather than focusing on apocalyptic destruction, the novel's post-apocalyptic vision focuses on the process of rebuilding among plentiful nature. As Porter describes:

> We see no refugee camps filled with sick and dying people, no bombed out cities with charred corpses, no sign of madness or despair. Instead, we see happy survivors surrounded by clean water, blue sky and green trees, and amply supplied with fruit, pecans, and catfish. (Porter, 1993, p. 45)

Fort Repose's inhabitants learn to use its plentiful natural resources, such as oranges, sugar cane crops, river fishing, or natural salt groves. Through natural wealth, the novel therefore once more parallels *Revelation*'s New Jerusalem, which is depicted as fecund and abundant in wealth (*Rev.*, 21:17–21). The novel also furthers the pastoral fantasy, as the characters replace the comforts of modern civilisation with agrarian labour, which benefits them mentally and physically. For instance, Randy feels "better" and more fulfilled than before the disaster (p. 178). The novel sets aside the true horror of nuclear annihilation in favour of depicting a rural idyll, which supports Porter's reading of the novel's tendency to downplay the significance of nuclear war. As this article further argues, the novel, rather than purely ignoring the implications of the catastrophe, instead frames them as justifiable, granting only the morally and physically strong the opportunity to rebuild an Edenic world in communion with nature.

As Porter notes, Frank expresses three principal conditions of the pastoral:

the return to nature, withdrawal from the world of politics and
history, and a belief in the virtues of simplicity. (Porter, 1993, p.
44)

These pastoral elements emerge fully as the novel posits that a simple
existence spent harvesting and sustaining their community is more
meaningful for the survivors than joining what remains of the United States.
At the end of the novel, when the characters are offered reintegration into
surviving American civilisation, they not only reject it, but are portrayed as
thriving in contrast to the other remaining pockets of civilisation. For
example, a government decontamination task force which visits them states
that they have more food than most other surviving zones (p. 306). Once
again, the novel invokes a comparison between shattered remnants of a
'fallen' modern world with the Edenic idyll of Fort Repose. By
emphasising the community's self-reliance, the novel further appeals to a
key American discourse: Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of self-reliance,
which is, as Hajing Liang (2013, p. 1351) argues, a cornerstone of
American individualism. The destruction of modern, urban America
becomes an opportunity for the novel's protagonists to return to a simpler,
idealised American existence through a localised, individual effort. The
rural as pastoral space presents an idealised space disconnected from any
networks associated with modern civilisation.

   The novel's treatment of nature and Christianity cohere in a clear disdain
for contemporary modernity, idealising a return to a better American past,
including a return to nature. As the survivors return to nature in a literal
sense, the novel thereby naturalises their social formations in turn. They
have returned to Eden, and this means that their family and gender roles in
turn are those which are 'natural', preceding the modern 'fall' from grace.

Why Misanthropy Matters: The Legacy of *Alas, Babylon*

The highly misanthropic and politically specific approach to apocalypse in
Alas, Babylon embodies how the dual connotations of apocalypse can yield
diverse messages. Despite its specific conservative stance, however, the
novel is a case study for themes which permeate across societal and literary
apocalyptic fantasies. This is because *Alas, Babylon* originates from a
crucial period for post-apocalyptic writing. The 1950s saw a surge in stories
that imagine the destruction of society because an apocalyptic future

became, for the first time, a real threat. Nuclear fears in response to this potential future first developed after the use of nuclear bombs in World War II. The development of hydrogen bombs and introduction of Intercontinental missiles reinforced this nuclear threat (Scheibach, 2021, p. 10). Nuclear anxieties further increased in the West due to successful nuclear bomb tests conducted by the Soviet Union (Ciglioni, 2021, p. 990), alongside reports of fallout from nuclear tests, such as Strontium-90 found in consumer milk products (Porter, 1993, p. 44). The post-war period of the 1940s and 1950s confronted the world and US-American society with the tangible threat of nuclear annihilation and fallout, which radically opened up the apocalyptic imaginary.

O'Leary (1998, p. 7) writes that while the apocalypse has been a core theme in Christian culture for over two thousand years, the nuclear threat posed by atomic bombs made "the threat of planetary destruction credible to a much wider audience". The existence of nuclear bombs enabled fantasies of an entirely new scale of destruction, which stimulated religious, political, and literary fantasies of this revolutionary potential for annihilation. As Schwartz concludes (2006, p. 406), "the annihilation of the entire species had never before presented itself as a real and present danger", yet with the visible impact and potential of nuclear bombs, ordinary citizens, politicians and writers could "for the first time, contemplate the destruction of the entire human race as a plausible, short-term scenario for humanity". As a result, the number of stories depicting the consequences of complete nuclear war as a plausible scenario increased. As Porter (1993, p. 44) points out, this cultural moment also created a market for reassuring constructions of these scenarios: "the nation's hunger for reassurance [was] at its peak". The 1950s featured a range of anxieties which could merge with nuclear anxieties in this market from reassurance, from concerns over the mass saturation of commercialism and consumption to the fraught and morphing positions of women and people of colour in society (Halliwell, 2007, pp. 4–5, 11). Post-apocalyptic stories had unprecedented scenarios to imagine, but also the opportunity to find positive meaning within these fantasies. Treating nuclear annihilation as a justifiable event could serve a tangible function in addressing contemporary anxieties across the political spectrum.

Alas, Babylon ranked highly in popularity among this wave of disaster stories. Schwartz (2006, p. 410) even argues that out of four mainstream 1950s novels depicting nuclear war, it "had the greatest impact on American culture". It sold immensely well and due to its emphasis on survivalist techniques, it featured as required reading in many American high schools in the Cold War period (2006, p. 410). Porter (1993, p. 4) and Ciglioni (2021, p. 995) similarly emphasise the novel's popularity, pointing out that the novel was in print for numerous decades. This demonstrates the novel's long-spanning influence. Due to its enduring popularity, the novel's approach to apocalypse has influenced not only literary successors, but also the cultural apocalyptic imaginary. This influence extends beyond individual popularity to the crucial role nuclear war stories had in shaping the post-apocalyptic genre as it is frequently recognised.

The novel's misanthropic approach to apocalypse is emblematic of many science fiction and post-apocalyptic stories of this period, which discuss Christian themes and the potentials of apocalypse in several ways. The establishment of these themes in nuclear literature shaped post-apocalyptic writing to come, as these stories provided the blueprint for literary apocalyptic imaginings that were adapted to new societal crises. In *Remainders of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline*, Bellamy (2021, p. 32) discusses how post-apocalyptic stories of the post-war period shaped the tropes, images and settings of what he calls the 'post-apocalyptic mode'. During this period, speculative fiction responded to "the cataclysmic possible futures unleashed by atomic war", as described above. As a result, he argues, "the calcification of post-apocalypse tropes occurs in the 1940s and 1950s" (Bellamy, 2021, p. 50), within this first significant wave of post-apocalyptic storytelling. These tropes then became "delinked from their historical context and redeployed in the abstract" (Bellamy, 2021, p. 50). Post-apocalyptic stories across the later twentieth and twenty-first century adapt the images and themes first expressed in the setting of nuclear apocalypse to their contemporary cultural crises. Critically reading how stories from this originating period imagine apocalypse therefore provides a crucial tool in understanding attitudes of the post-apocalyptic genre, and the cultural constructions the genre has influenced in turn. Dissecting how *Alas, Babylon* exemplifies a particularly Christian-influenced misanthropic fantasy of apocalypse

enables us to identify and critique these sentiments in the stories and fantasies the novel has helped to inspire.

Critically Examining Apocalyptic Misanthropy

Alas, Babylon conveys a misanthropy that justifies the large scale of apocalyptic destruction and suffering for an opportunity to return to a simpler, idealised past. This approach to apocalyptic fantasy expresses a clear and targeted conservative tendency to mythologise the past and condemn modern civilisations. While not all post-apocalyptic stories replicate these sentiments, many of these themes resonate across the genre. Even when less direct, Christian themes of divine punishment, necessary hardship and a desire to re-create a lost Edenic existence appear in many post-apocalyptic stories. Frank's contemporary, Walter Miller, for example, engages with this theme in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), where he critiques the inherent desire for simplicity and deliberately refuses to provide any unscathed pastoral refuges in his nuclear landscape.

This article has described how influential post-apocalyptic stories of the 1950s were in shaping both literary and cultural apocalyptic fantasies. The key role of these misanthropic and hopeful treatments of apocalypse in these novels therefore highlights a crucial ideological construction that resonates with the apocalyptic fantasies that have followed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. Many of the components of this apocalyptic misanthropy, including those of deserved punishment and conservative yearnings for 'the way things were', thrive beyond the bounds of *Alas, Babylon* and can be found in post-apocalyptic stories up to this day. By recognising these tendencies in fiction, we can perceive and highlight similar desires and attitudes in the apocalyptic fantasies ordinary people across society construct, as literary and societal apocalyptic fantasies strongly influence each other. This justifies an examination of the many problems and implications of this apocalyptic misanthropy. To conclude, this article seeks out relevant critiques of such an approach to apocalypse.

Apocalyptic fantasies which draw on ideas of divine punishment involve a narrow view of responsibility and suffering. Apocalyptic scenarios mostly perceive humanity as a unit. Lucas Pohl (2021, p. 205) elaborates on this in reference to climate catastrophe. He argues that apocalyptic

fantasies elevate a mentality that all of humanity is 'in this together', implying that:

> such a thing as 'humanity' in the sense of a global community that shares the same privileges, values, [and] knowledge [exists]. (Pohl, 2021, p. 205)

This depoliticised mentality fails to account for global power dynamics and diverse modes of living across the planet. In Pohl's example, specific countries, cultures and groups carry more liability than others for the driving causes of climate catastrophe, while the Global South disproportionally suffers. In the case of *Alas, Babylon* and other nuclear war stories, nuclear holocaust comes down to the political tensions of the Cold War, primarily driven by the United States and Russia. The novel is, additionally, primarily focused and aware of an American civilisation and modernity. Yet the novel implicates all of modern humanity in deserving punishment, all alike guilty in the degradation and corruption of the world. The characters' discussions of the catastrophe's consequences frequently refer to a global community of humanity, e.g. "nature will attempt to undo what man has done" (p. 215) or referring to the human "race" as a whole (p. 296). Through its invocation of Christian themes and optimistic outlook on apocalypse, the novel justifies global destruction for grievances levelled against American modernity and cities. Additionally, the life facilitated by nuclear annihilation is not drawn from a universal past but carries connotations of middle-class rural American life.

By treating apocalypse as an opportunity, the novel implies that half the globe can be incinerated in a conflict the US is partially responsible for, yet this is positive if the American middle-class life based on 'family values' successfully faces the challenge. The narrative is unable to address the horrific scale of what nuclear conflict would entail, because it is preoccupied with presenting a reassuring, pastoral fantasy for the American middle class. Instead of acknowledging the specific responsibility for this destruction, it obscures the political in favour of implicitly depoliticising Christian themes of divine punishment. In doing so, the novel embodies a core tension of misanthropic apocalyptic fantasies. They eschew responsibility for suffering, choosing to retreat into anti-modern fantasies that give the comfort of a clean slate and return to tradition. As discussed,

these tendencies break the bounds of post-apocalyptic fiction. Furthermore, they are not always politically conservative. In Ecocriticism, Garrard discusses how environmental movements often mirror similar anti-modern sentiments, which oppose a tainted modernity with a purer Edenic nature from which we have been alienated. The following apocalypticism often takes on misanthropic tones, particularly that of deserved punishment (Garrard, 2012, pp. 112–113). In real-life and post-apocalyptic stories, misanthropy inhibits taking productive responsibility. This lack of responsibility ties into an incapacity to truly imagine change.

Misanthropic apocalyptic fantasies see the apocalypse as a clean slate. Only after annihilation rids the planet of a disdained modernity, can survivors build a better world, which replicates an idealised past. Such a fantasy deems modern living irredeemable rather than recognising flawed ideas which can be resurrected anew in improved forms. Faced with a malfunctioning and destructive present, those who fall to an apocalyptic misanthropy see that present's destruction as a clean slate leading to the resurrection of simpler pre-modern lifestyles, in which people lived closer to nature. This view of the apocalypse eclipses any possibility for alternative ways of living that transform our flawed present rather than rejecting it altogether. This speaks to a tendency to favour the known over imagining alternatives. This tendency is easily replicated across the political spectrum. The systems of society and forms of modernity forged in the late twentieth and twenty-first century are deeply harmful, while feeling inescapable for many living within them. Apocalyptic fantasies can provide the catharsis of a clean slate, eliminating the need for slow and laborious transformation of modes of living. They offer the reassurance of a simpler past, which lacks the harmful complications of modern life. As a result, these fantasies convey an inability to take responsibility for the work of transforming flawed modes of living into new and alternative societies. The reassuring apocalypse instead offers the opportunity to rid humanity of complications, all at the price of destruction. Just as the specific example of *Alas, Babylon* demonstrates, that destruction can then be justified through invocations of sin and purification. However, while these apocalyptic fantasies seek to be reassuring, they ignore the genuine cost of apocalyptic destruction. In non-fictional contexts, this cost is much harder to dismiss. As O'Leary (1998, p. 228) writes, "the saving bliss of

catastrophe is a luxury we can ill afford". We must be critical of how misanthropic apocalyptic fantasies filter from fiction into real-life political and societal narrative.

Conclusion

This article has traced the misanthropic potentials of apocalyptic fantasies in Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon*. The novel shows how apocalyptic fictional scenarios can depict the apocalypse as an opportunity for simplification, creating blank slates that allow survivors to replicate idealised pasts. Christian themes of punishment, final judgement and sin underline a profound disdain for modernity and justify the suffering that the cleansing apocalypse necessitates. A misanthropic treatment, which perpetuates conservative ideas of an American golden past, emerges. As established, *Alas, Babylon* is part of a wave of post-apocalyptic stories in the 1950s which calcified many of the tropes and themes that influence not only following post-apocalyptic stories, but also societal apocalyptic imaginaries. Accordingly, recognising the elements of this apocalyptic misanthropy and its potential politics provides a tool which enhances our understanding of apocalyptic fantasies across society. As consequences of the climate crisis mount and new political tensions arise, a nuanced perspective of apocalyptic fantasies and rhetoric becomes increasingly important. Apocalyptic rhetoric and imaginaries are becoming increasingly widespread in our stories, news media and many other outlets. Similarly, misanthropic acceptance of apocalyptic scenarios becomes easier, as a solution to ecological problems and political tensions seems increasingly unlikely. However, as this article has sought to establish, embracing misanthropic apocalyptic fantasies eschews responsibility and inhibits a capacity for affecting and imagining change. As apocalyptic fantasies populate our stories and everyday life, it is crucial to recognise the narrative reassurance these fantasies provide. In human history, the complete breakdown of societies seldom leaves behind intrepid survivors, but shattered remainders. Unlike fictional apocalyptic scenarios, the narrative closure of a clean slate comes at a cost which we cannot accept.

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