IJCRT.ORG   **ISSN : 2320-2882**

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)
An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

INFLUENCE OF ANTHROPOCENE ON NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN ERNEST CLINE'S READY PLAYER ONE

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Abstract: This paper analyses the concept of the Anthropocene in young-adult fiction. Specifically, it looks at the effects of the Anthropocene that are present within the novel and the way in which the environmental crisis in the book 'guides' the narrative as well as the message presented. The young adult novel selected for analysis is Ready Player One by Ernest Cline. The intent is to find out what perspectives on environmental crisis and other representations on the environment are present and what young readers could take from these representations.

Index Terms - Anthropocene, Young-Adult Fiction, Environmental Crisis, Post-Apocalyptic Literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

"Young adult literature exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation [...]".

Karen Coats (2011)

Karen Coats expresses the importance of young adult literature that "These books full of questionable material about sex, drugs and antiwar protests taught me what it meant to be an American teenager in the 1970s. From Nat Hentoff (1968), Judy Blume (1975), S.E. Hinton (1967), Robert Cormier (1974), and John Donovan (1969), I learned what was going on in the world outside my sheltered community, and I got some insight into the people who sat across from me at the lunch table. It wasn't until I went back to those books as an adult that I realized how much of my own everyday speech, expressions, thought patterns, and values had been influenced by their words and ideologies." Bean and Rigoni (2001; qtd from Bean & Moni, 2003) explain that "adolescent readers view characters in young adult novels as living and wrestling with real problems close to their own life experiences as teens". Therefore, we would like to focus on young adult literature that engages with environmental problems, which proves to be a much-debated topic these days. Environmental problems are especially apparent in post-apocalyptic young adult novels.

One concept related to environmental change and environmental crises keeps emerging: the Anthropocene. This concept will be dealt with in depth, but it mainly entails that humankind exerts an immense influence on the geology and geological processes of our planet. Since very little research has been conducted on environmental depictions in young adult, post-apocalyptic literature, we would like to venture into this realm and analyse *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline. *Ready Player One* is a compelling story of a teenage boy living in a world ravaged by environmental crises and has even been adapted onto screen.

Questions like *"What does human society look like in the book?", "What organizations are present to combat the crisis?", "What has changed in respect to our current society due to the crisis?",* etc. will be addressed. By examining these two questions, we will try and find out whether the societal concerns about the environment and the human influences on the environment are reflected in literature.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a relatively young form of critical analysis. Its rise came somewhere in the mid-eighties. Essays, book reviews and notes were published in journals and periodicals, and universities started adding environmental literary courses to their curricula. Before that, environmental literary criticism was almost non-existent. Race, class and gender were topics that were covered extensively in the literature, and even though environmental crises were covered in the news, they were not yet to be found within studies of literary criticism (Cheryll Glotfelty, 1996). The first time the term 'ecocriticism' was used, in 1978 by William Rueckert.

Glotfelty describes ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Astrid Bracke, 2012). Then, there is Lawrence Buell (2005) who defines ecocriticism as "an umbrella term […] used to refer to the environmentally oriented study of literature and (less often) the arts more generally and to the theories that underlie such critical practice" (Astrid Bracke, 2012).

Most literary criticism relates the text to 'world', in which case the 'world' denotes the social sphere. In the case of environmental literary criticism, this world is expanded to include the entire ecosphere. To reflect on contemporary environmental issues and topics, shifting the emphasis onto the urban seems reasonable since that is the environment aspect most people are situated in. That makes it easier to reflect on their situation.

The Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is an emerging concept, and, when used to perform a close reading on literature, it finds its bearings in ecocriticism, a concept that, as explained, is often found on the belief that literary criticism can aid in being a solution to an environmental crisis. Raising awareness about human-nature relations is a common goal in ecocritical analysis and would be enabled by analyzing elements of the Anthropocene in literature (Bracke, 2014).

The "Anthropocene" is a term originally coined by Crutzen & Stoermer (2000), who posit the term next to the "Holocene", which is the geological epoch dating back ten to twelve thousand years. The concept of the Anthropocene as geological epoch denotes that we live in an era in which environmental problems are manmade and that the influence of humans is on a geological scale. The influences could be compared to planetary developments like the movements of tectonic plates. Steffen et al. (2011) second Crutzen and Stoermer's claim; they mention that "The human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system", adding that humans influence biogeochemical or element cycles, modify terrestrial water cycles and are likely driving an extinction event.

Young Adult Literature

The concept of young adult literature will be discussed to explain the concept of the genre as well as explain how young readers might interpret the themes or messages that is present within the books. One of the distinctive features of young adult literature are the themes that are dealt within the novel. The themes deal with all kinds of topics that are relevant to adolescents and range from pregnancies and family conflicts to racism. They provide the teens with a guide as to how to cope with issues like these in real life. Since the protagonists deal with these issues, readers can relate since they often resemble their own life experiences (Bean & Moni, 2003). The teen protagonists themselves also display a few common characteristics. The characters are often "perceptive, sensitive, intelligent, mature, and independent" (Herz & Gallo, 1996; qtd. in Bean & Moni, 2003). Also, it is noted that young adult literature, and the protagonists within the texts, often go through a growing process (Trites, 2007; qtd. in Coats,

2011). Another feature of adolescent literature is that the reader is invited to make sense of the text by identifying him or herself with the protagonist and mirroring parts of what the protagonist goes through, the society he or she lives in, or the actions that the protagonist undertakes (Coats, 2011). Understanding what young readers relate to might enable us to understand how a message in the novel is brought across to adolescents.

Ready Player One

Ready Player One is a hugely popular young adult novel, written by Ernest Cline and published in 2011. It is a debut novel, and not only is it popular amongst young adults, it has also received critical acclaim. In 2012, it received the Alex Award from the Young Adult Library Services Association division of the American Library Association ("Yalsa's Alex Awards", 2012) and won the Prometheus Award in the same year ("Prometheus award winners announced"). The Alex Awards were specially brought into existence to be awarded to books that have special appeal to young adults whilst being written for adults ("Yalsa's Alex Awards", 2012), whereas the Prometheus Awards are honoring libertarian fiction ("Prometheus Awards: A Short History").

Even though *Ready Player One* is now widely marketed as a young adult novel, it is evident from the Alex Awards the novel has won, it was not originally meant to fall into this category. It does, however, deal with themes that are very much related to the occupations and mindsets of young adults. The main character, Wade, is being bullied for example. He also talks about his insecurities, his (lack of) friends, his crush, and his sexual desires. Wade mentions for example that he doesn't understand how he can "be expected to know when the adults were bullshitting" him (pg. 16). Wade lives on the outskirts of Oklahoma City somewhere around the year of 2040.

The world as it is being described in this imagined future is somewhat bleak (or, in Wade's words, they had "been born into an ugly world" (pg. 34)). An "oil crisis" was the onset of an energy crisis, which led to the world's population going on a massive trek into the cities. This significant increase in the urbanized society led to loads of crime, unemployment and housing shortage. To deal with the problem of housing, the "stacks" were created; huge towers of recreational vehicles that had been stacked together on the outskirts of any major city. These stacks are often very unsafe; the places are crime-riddled, and it is not uncommon for a stack to topple over. After his parents' death, Wade went to live with his aunt who mainly took him in because of the increase in food stamps she would get. Since Wade is not a very sociable person and it is clear that his aunt is not interested in spending any time with him, he spends most of his time in "the OASIS", an online multiplayer game that allows the player to feel like they are being transported into another world, since the game is based on virtual reality. The creator of the game, Halliday, has recently passed and left the players of his game with a contest: there are three 'easter eggs' hidden in his game.

The first one to find all of them and finish the quests that these Easter eggs present to the player, wins Halliday's entire fortune. Wade is obsessed with winning Halliday's fortune, leading him to make an entire study around Halliday's life and interests. Most of his waking hours Wade spends in the OASIS, since he also attends school in the game. He even mentions that "being human totally sucks most of the time. Videogames are the only thing that make life bearable" (pg. 11).

This does not only apply to Wade since most of humanity is trying to forget about their daily lives by going online and entering the game. The fact that so many people prefer to spend their time within the OASIS turns the game into a new world that poses a 'new reality' to many of its players. As Trexler and Johns-Putra (2011) mentioned, science fiction novels are often occupied with themes of environmental change and the formation of a terraformed planet. The OASIS could be described as a 'terraformed' and 'otherworldly' planet as well. It is otherworldly in the sense that the game is different from any other world that we know today. For example, it can only be occupied by humans, so there are no animals within the OASIS, except for when someone chooses their character to resemble one. This is quite interesting, since this is also a clear example of the reinsertion of "'man' into nature only to re-elevate 'him' within and above it" (Baskin, 2015). Most of the world's population chooses to live in a world where they do not interact with (actual) animals. Aside from the OASIS not being occupied by animals and looking like a completely different world than Earth as we know it, it is apparently hard to distinguish from the 'real world'. Wade mentions that his surroundings in the OASIS look "almost (but not quite) real" (pg. 27). The game

is rendered in 3D and the people who enter the OASIS are able to wear all types of gear to make it feel as if they are actually wondering around in the worlds the OASIS provides. Since the OASIS has become a very real reality to most of humanity, the argument could very well be made that the OASIS is otherworldly planet, being a completely different world than the world as we know it today.

The OASIS also suggests the creation of a terraformed world. Even though it does not fit the definition of Williams and Trexler and Johns-Putra completely, it has not been made habitable by changing the climate on the planet and it does not "offer a striking parable of how best to manage environmental disaster on Earth" per se, it is a planet that has been made inhabitable for humankind. Everyone living on Earth is looking for an escape from the planet when entering into the OASIS. In this 'world', they can again experience fun and the freedoms that are no longer accessible on Earth, which makes the OASIS a planet that many find more habitable than Earth.

It is not only the game that suggests the formation of an 'otherworldly' planet. Earth itself is also subjected to otherworldliness. The creation of this otherworld is due to a temporal shift, since there is a jump in time of approximately thirty years between the time the book

was published and the time it is set. The world as it is described in the novel is a bleak and dark place. As mentioned, a significant percentage of the world's population is living in the stacks, the unsafe outskirts of major cities. These stacks alone create a sense of other worldliness, but there is more. In the introduction Halliday's contest is introduced. Wade speaks of his amazement about the announcement on the news that a person - even though of world-changing influence - has died. He mentions that "the people of Planet Earth had other concerns. The ongoing energy crisis. Catastrophic climate change. Widespread famine, poverty, and disease, half a dozen wars" (pg. 1). He goes on to say that broadcasts on the news more often speak of "the outbreak of some new killer virus, or another major city vanishing in a mushroom cloud" (pg. 1) than the dead of a famous person. These types of environmental disaster are unlike any disaster we know today since the scale on which it happens and the frequency with which it happens are unbeknownst in today's world.

It is clear, then that the world's population is dealing with immense environmental disasters. There is, of course, the mention of the "ongoing energy crisis" (pg. 59), "the oil crisis" or "the Global Energy Crisis" (17) throughout the novel. Wade discovers how this crisis came to be by scouring through books that can be found within OASIS libraries. First, Wade discovers in these books that he is part of the human race. Something so fundamental was apparently written down by authors "who weren't afraid to be honest" (pg. 16) and it was kept from the masses. In these books, humans is called "a really smart animal" (pg.16), which also relates to the 'elevation of man above nature' as described by Baskin. Wade then walks the reader through a speed-lesson in the world history of humanity. Within this narrative of human's history, Wade explains that humans had evolved to develop great things and a society was built. This society, however, needed lots of energy to keep going and before Wade was even born, the last of these resources were drained. The civilization that was built could no longer keep running, meaning that civilization had to cut back on the use of its energy resources and that is what is commonly named the "Global Energy Crisis". It is clear then, as well, that it is humankind who is 'to blame' for this to happen. Wade, however, does not feel that way. His mom had apparently still lived in this era since he mentioned that she had lived in a world that provided plenty of resources and she "had to watch it all slowly vanish" (pg. 18). Wade mentions that "she was a victim of fate and cruel circumstance, like everyone else" (pg. 18), and that is why he does not blame her for the state the world is in. The fact is, however, that mankind had a great deal of influence on the planet's geological state, which seems to be a clear characteristic of the Anthropocene, the era that is under significant influence of the human race (Baskin, 2015; Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000;).

Again, there are elements in the novel that point to the effects of the Anthropocene and there are elements that seem to point in the opposite direction. As I have shown, the world in which Wade lives, whether it be the virtual 'world' or Earth, can be described as an otherworldly or terraformed planet, other than any world we know today. Also, there are allusions to the environmental crisis, or oil or energy crisis as it is called in the novel, being manmade. Even though Wade does not explicitly blame the previous generation, it has become quite clear that it is due to human influences and interferences that the world is now tormented by environmental disaster.

The Environmental Crisis and How It Guides the Narrative And the Message

The manmade crisis that is described in *Ready Player One* has been caused by the human race depleting Earth's resources and has catastrophic effects on planet Earth. The way these crises guide the narrative, are used to further the plot, and are bringing across a message, however, differ immensely. To reflect on the question at hand, the questions that Dürbeck (2014) posed will be used as a guideline, which were "How are large scale global changes depicted and which characters are suitable to reflect on a deep time perspective?", "Which kinds of agencies are thematized to deploy the environmentally focused narratives?" and "Which modes of narration (comic, tragic, ironic, didactic) are deployed to reflect on the challenges of the Anthropocene?". These questions will enable me to answer my research question as to how the environmental crisis is guiding the plot narrative and is possibly trying to convey a message.

Ready Player One

The central message in *Ready Player One* is different. Instead, the central message mainly deals with friendships, overcoming insecurities, and the fight between 'good and evil'. Even though the central message is not related to environmental destruction, the narratives of *Ready Player One* does striking show. It is set in the future in a world that is destroyed due to previous generations' actions and the current generation has to deal with the numerous changes the climate change brought over them.

Since the central message of the novel does not revolve around the environmental crisis, the crisis in *Ready Player One*, then, is more of an enabling factor in order to create the 'terraformed' world for the story to take place in. This terraformed world had to be created in order to form an interesting story, obviously, but possibly also to make it believable or understandable to the reader that someone would want to spend all their time in an online game. The world as it is described is a tough and unpleasant place to live, and most of humanity finds solace in living in another world which might become more 'real' to them than their lives on Earth.

Even though the 'environmental message' is not central to the story, examining it may still offer valuable insights. The novel takes another direction when it comes to the ultimate cause of the crisis. Instead of 'blaming' humanity, *Ready Player One* makes it sound as if humanity had very little to do with the crisis. The current generation is born into the energy crisis and are responsible, which is also made very clear within the novel. When Wade reads through the 'secret' books in the OASIS-library, he discovers humanity's history and the cause of the energy crisis. He mentions that he found out in those books that "burning all of those fossil fuels had some nasty side effects, like raising the temperature of our planet and screwing up the environment. So now the polar ice caps are melting, sea levels are rising, and

the weather is all messed up. Plants and animals are dying off in record numbers, and lots of people are starving and homeless" (pg. 17). Everything is in the past tense, and it is written in the context of evolution, domestication of animals, the invention of computers and the landing on the moon. Even though the year is only 2040, the way the text around the environmental crisis is written sounds like it happened in a distant period of time. The citizens that are alive in the year 2040, then, apparently did not even know about this episode in their history and are far from responsible. The previous generation does not get the blame either, at least, from Wade. As I have explained, Wade states that he does not blame his mom (or anyone of the previous generation, for that matter), for having 'caused' the environmental crisis his generation is in. He even mentions that "Her generation had it the hardest. She'd been born into a world of plenty, then had to watch it all slowly vanish." (pg. 18).

What may come across as some sort of 'environmentally aware' message, is the fact that in the book the 'history' is dubbed the "Good Old Days", in which "things used to be pretty awesome" (pg. 17-8) and "Things" nowadays (in the year 2040) are "kinda terrifying" (pg. 18). Besides these statements, the reader themselves will probably not want to live in a world with constant environmental threats, diseases, power cuts, etc. which might make them reflect upon their current behaviours. On the other hand, teenagers might find Wade's world rather attractive. He is able to spend all his time online, in the OASIS, a game that lets you discover an infinite number of places and in which you can be any character you want to be. Still, he overall tone of the novel is rather dark. The world is a bleak place in contrast to the world as we know it today in terms of environmental disasters, public safety and overall quality of life. As the novel summarizes it succinctly: Wade's generation is basically "born at a pretty crappy time in history", and "human civilization is in 'decline'" (pg. 18).

To answer Dürbeck's questions, then, it seems that no characters in *Ready Player One* are fit to reflect upon the environmental, deep time changes. Wade nor other characters are suitable to reflect upon the changes since Wade was till recently not even aware of the fact that there existed a world other than the one, he is born into. From other characters (players in the game, for instance) it is not made explicit whether they are aware of this fact. There are no organizations either that seem to be taking charge in the environmentally difficult times. There seems to be little or no intervention of an overarching organization that takes care of the citizens and tries make planet Earth into an inhabitable place again. Also, the tone of the novel is rather dark. This could be understood as a didactic message, since teenagers might reflect upon their situation and realize that they do not want to live in Wade's world, but I would say this is not the author's intent. The 'environmental history' is explained very briefly and it is not one of the character's main concerns. It is clear then, that the oil or energy crisis in *Ready Player One* is there to enable the plot to develop and it helps form this 'other-world' in which the story is set and not to bring across a message.

In this paper, I attempted to answer the question "What effects of the Anthropocene are present in post-apocalyptic, young-adult literature and how the post-apocalyptic environmental crisis used to guide the narrative and message in the book". It seemed important to do so with the aid of young-adult literature, since, as the opening quote in the introduction by Karen Coats explained, young-adult literature might influence the way young people think, speak and act. We chose to analyse *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline since it is widely popular and discusses environmental crisis and the aftermath of this crisis.

In *Ready Player One* mankind is also the ultimate factor in the environmental crisis, even though they are not explicitly blamed and are more so portrayed to be victims as well. *Ready Player One,* on the other hand, exhibits other 'typically' anthropocentric elements like its formation of multiple terraformed or otherworldly planets. The crisis projected is 'used' to create the other worldly planet on which Wade lives. The environmental message that is conveyed is the one that humankind is indeed responsible for the environmental crisis, but the main character also sees mankind as a victim of the crisis. The crisis is used in order to shape a thrilling plot.

Conclusion

Young adults who read the book might still, however, adopt the viewpoint of humankind ultimately causing the environmental crisis and project this view onto the ongoing environmental crisis today. As explained in the introduction, a post-apocalyptic narrative is often accompanied by an environmental crisis. It could be speculated that many post-apocalyptic novels present environment as a theme within the narrative. However, they represent the environmental crisis in such a way that it allows young readers to reflect upon

their own situations cannot be given in certain. To fully explore this goal as to how young adult literature presents the Anthropocene or environmental crises in general in depth, more books would have to be analyzed. Moreover, more books should be analyzed that do not explicitly mention an environmental crisis at all.

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