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JOHN CHRISTOPHER'S *EMPTY WORLD* AS AN APOCALYPTIC TEXT

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Abstract:

The novel Empty World is an epitome of apocalyptic text since it focuses on the indefinite power of fate which the children in the novel cannot deny and they had to face the life in all its vicissitudes of fate. The novel is no doubt, an apocalyptic text, as it encompassed notions such as solitude, power, and fate. The paper has been written taking into consideration the key points of apocalyptic narration. MLA eighth edition has been used for documentation and citing references.

Keywords: *Apocalyptic, Solitude, Power, Fate, Harassment, etc.*

John Christopher, also known as Christopher Samuel Youd, published *Empty World* as his eleventh novel in 1977. The novel recounts the story of fifteen-year-old Neil Miller who first loses his parents in a tragic car accident and then finds himself in the midst of a deadly pandemic caused by the Calcutta Plague. Neil moves to his grandfather's house but shortly afterwards, loses him as well. The plague starts killing most of London's residents and Neil develops immunity to the virus. Wandering the streets of London in search of company, he meets Tommy and Susie and begins to live with them until one day he wakes up to see their dead bodies. After burying the children, Neil once again cycles around until he meets two girls by the names of Lucy and Billie. The three children settle down and engage in an endless cycle of events that eventually bestows them the only meaning left in a void and meaningless world.

The apocalyptic sphere in *Empty World* encompasses notions such as solitude, power, and fate. The major constituent of the apocalyptic sphere is solitude which dominates the novel from the beginning till the end. All the characters not only fight to stay alive but also battle a secret nemesis: solitude. In *Empty World*, solitude appears in forms of social isolation and emotional loneliness (Tilburg and Dykstra, 486). The sudden and terrifying deaths of millions of people result in the social isolation of those still left alive. Neil is socially isolated after the death of his grandfather and combined with emotional loneliness, he is obliged to overcome this major problem. After settling in with Billie and Lucy, Neil gets accustomed to their company. Later, when the girls leave the house for a couple of hours, Neil once again remembers the heavy burden of solitude: "But it was not those things, nor the cold grey ashes in the hearth, which made him marvel at the thought that he had once lived here, and believed himself reasonably content. It was the silence, the crushing awareness of solitude, which did that. He felt a compulsion to break the stillness to say something, anything. His voice sounded like that of a stranger; and the silence which settled back seemed even heavier, more pervading" (Christopher, 106).

At this moment, Neil becomes aware of the fact that he has to break the silence and continue his life with the company of the two girls, no matter what happens. The negative atmosphere of solitude which exists as a result of the apocalyptic sphere forces the three adolescents to stick together and tolerate one another. Therefore, Neil becomes obliged to Lucy and Billie as much as Lucy and Billie are obliged to Neil. Thus, the feeling of obligation is reciprocal and gradually transforms into a daily

routine in the repetitive lives of these characters. Though the friendship between Neil and Lucy persists, Neil has a hard time coming to terms with Billie.

Despite the solitude and the obligation to get along with one another, Neil, Lucy, and Billie often engage in a struggle for power. Nietzsche put forward that the will to power is the essence of life and that human beings engage in an endless process of asserting their power over one another. In *Empty World*, the true nature of human beings is exposed through the apocalyptic sphere. Billie as the antagonist of the novel has a strong dislike for Neil and, deep inside, does not confirm living together with him but nevertheless conforms to Lucy due to rational motives such as solitude and survival. The struggle for power in *Empty World* occurs between various characters but mainly between Neil and Billie which initially takes place in the form of verbal harassment: “She had always had an annoying habit of whistling through her teeth: now she did it almost continuously and always the same tune “The Cock o’ the North,” off-key. In the end, when Lucy was in the kitchen, he said to her in a low but savage voice: “If you don’t stop that whistling, I swear I’ll kill you! I mean it.” She looked at him, crestfallen. “I’m sorry, Neil.” He turned away without answering. Even his own name, spoken in her voice, rasped on his nerves” (Christopher 119).

John Christopher exposes the nature of human beings through adolescents within an apocalyptic setting. Neil, Lucy, and Billie are in a way predetermined to fight and clash with one another as this is the only form of asserting their individualism. Therefore, the clashes between these children are not only inescapable but also compulsory. Minor clashes sometimes occur between Neil and Lucy as well. Towards the end of the novel, the clashes between Neil and Billie gradually transform into conflicts that result in acts of violence: “As he did, she rushed the last few paces, the kitchen knife bright in her upraised hand. Neil tried to fling himself to one side, but she was too close. He felt the blow on his chest, seeming to punch more than stab, and staggered, almost falling. Billie came at him again. Her face was strained, as though she were concentrating hard. He pressed the trigger, heard the hammer click futilely, and was just in time to throw up his left hand and grasp the wrist of the hand that held the knife” (Christopher, 120).

Billie’s violent attack on Neil is an expression of the disguised anger which accumulates deep inside her and finally explodes in a seriously violent manner. Billie is sick and tired of Neil having a say over their lives and urges Neil to step out of their lives. This violent conflict results in Neil getting wounded and seeking comfort alongside Lucy. Lucy is the character that represents balance, stability, and maternity, which is of utmost significance for both Neil and Billie. Though Lucy is unable to prevent conflicts between Neil and Billie, she does succeed in maintaining a balance between these two powers. In conclusion, Neil survives Billie’s violent attack and distances himself from her for some time, aware of the fact that he is stuck with her as long as they keep together and remain alive and well.

The apocalyptic condition prioritizes basic human needs and eliminates all artificial necessities imposed by the society and its governing system. The plague, therefore unveils the actual nature of human beings as all constructed needs are eradicated, leaving only the fundamental needs behind. All deemed valuable by the society such as money, fame, respect, and career are now simply void of meaning. Humans are reduced to the primary instinct of survival and solidarity through companionship. The apocalyptic setting which comes to being as a result of the fatal plague causes humans to regress to a primitive lifestyle. Ironically, this primitive lifestyle forces children and adolescents to behave and act in a more mature manner. This maturity occurs as a natural consequence of the survival instinct. They are obliged to face reality and make the best of it despite the exhausting repetitive state: “His life developed into a routine again. He raised about seven, washed and dressed and made breakfast. In the morning he walked in the Park when the weather was fine, and found him automatically following the same route every day [...] In the afternoon he visited the shops, or prepared fuel for his fire” (Christopher, 72).

Thus, in spite of all despair, the children manage to preserve their hope. All in all, Christopher’s narrative portrays a conspicuous account of apocalyptic fiction through the eyes of adolescent children. John Christopher’s *Empty World* is a realistic portrayal of an apocalyptic story involving a global pandemic, reflected through an adolescent perspective.

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