

The End as the Beginning:
The Apocalypse as a Cyclical Phenomenon
in John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*
and Richard Matheson's *I am legend*

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Introduction

On the 25th of January 2018 the doomsday clock was set to 2 minutes to midnight, meaning that according to the scientific community the world is now closer to a nuclear apocalypse than it has ever been before (*Bulletin*). Worryingly, the last time the world's scientific community deemed a nuclear apocalypse this close was in 1953, after the USA had announced they would "pursue the hydrogen bomb" (*Bulletin*). In the same period, in response to the widespread anxieties caused by the increasing nuclear threat, science fiction stories abounded that explored various post-nuclear apocalyptic scenarios. Two of the most lastingly influential novels in this genre are John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (hereafter, *Triffids*) (1951) and Richard Matheson's *I am legend* (1954). Both texts explore the apocalypse as a phenomenon wherein the civilizations of man inevitably rise and fall. In both narratives the characters experience an apocalypse that is caused by humanity and the protagonists have to learn to live in a post-apocalyptic world. The narratives explore the nature of science, technology and the identity of man within a pattern of creation and destruction. This thesis explores the apocalypse as a cyclical phenomenon in which the apocalypse is both the end and the beginning of civilization.

Chapter one will provide an analysis of the original meaning of the apocalypse as a phenomenon in literature and how this meaning has changed over the centuries. Studying the original meaning and how the apocalypse is explored in Post-World War II literature it will become clear how the technological advancements of the twenty-first century have impacted the literary concept of the apocalypse. Furthermore, I will provide a framework in which the apocalypse can be placed culturally and how the novel reflects on the culture of the 1940s and 1950s. The apocalypse narratives of Wyndham's *Triffids* and Richard Matheson's *I am legend* can be placed in the literary tradition of disaster literature. Chapter two will analyze the historical context of the 1940s and 1950s culture and how the technological development of the atomic bomb has changed the concept of the apocalypse. The time period of the 1940s and

1950s shows how the developments of that time have influenced *Triffids* and *I am legend*. Chapter three will analyze Wyndham's *Triffids* and will explain how the apocalypse explores scientific hubris and the inevitability of a nuclear apocalypse. By looking at what type of quest the protagonist undertakes and the role of society, nature and technology within the narrative it will become clear just how Wyndham deals with a reality in which it has become possible to end the world through nuclear fire. Chapter four will analyze Matheson's *I am legend*. The ironic narrative structure explores the cyclical nature of the apocalypse. In *I am Legend* the apocalypse is a phenomenon that seems to be unavoidable and as a result humanity will proceed from apocalypse to apocalypse in a never ending cycle. Human hubris will inescapably cause an apocalypse. Humanity and the irresponsible use of science-based technology will create the monsters that inevitably will destroy us.

Chapter One: The Apocalypse as a Literary Genre: from Revelation to Destruction and the Apocalypse as a Cyclical Phenomenon

The unstable political climate of the twenty-first century in which many nations possess nuclear weapons can be said to be a time of crisis. The aggressive language between Kim-Jong Un and Donald Trump is reminiscent of the Cold War rhetoric that almost led to a nuclear apocalypse (New York Times, 2018). Historically, there have been many crises that might have felt as an imminent apocalypse for contemporaries. Events such as the bubonic and pneumonic plagues – the Black Death - sweeping through Europe in 1347-48 and wiping out a quarter to a third of the population (McClellan and Dorn 192). For example as Susan Scott and Christopher J. Duncan state in *Return of the Black Death: The world's Greatest Serial Killer* “but to some people, a worldwide health threat might herald the ‘Apocalypse now’ scenario, the return of the next, Big One’, when a major epidemic of a deadly infectious disease, for which there is no treatment and no vaccine, will cause global catastrophe and threaten the existence of humanity” (2). For the people living in the fourteenth century it must indeed have felt like the end times. As Frank Kermode states in his book *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*, “When you read, as you must every passing day, that ours is the great age of crises -technological, military, cultural- you may well simply nod and proceed calmly to your business; for this assertion, upon which a multitude of important books is founded, is nowadays no more surprising that the opinion that the world is round” (93-94). Crises are of all ages and the belief that the world is going to end is not beholden to the twenty-first century. However, things *have* changed. Humanity now wields the atomic power to destroy the very world we inhabit and the fear of destruction has led to many works of apocalyptic nature. This differs greatly from historical crises that humanity had no direct hand in. However, knowing that the world can end and believing this, and thus taking action, are two very different things. The problem of the unbelievability of the end is something that as Maria Manuel Lisboa describes,

“We can understand apocalypse now, apocalypse whenever, but we may find it difficult to envisage apocalypse now and then, apocalypse now and again” (20). Apocalyptic narratives explore the unbelievability of the end.

As Lisboa states, “The apocalypse is one of the oldest tropes in literature and for good reason” (8). By imagining death and destruction humanity can either get to terms with the inevitability of death or attempt to avoid such scenarios. The fear of a nuclear apocalypse has not been the only conceivable apocalypse. Kermode juxtaposes the apocalypse with the credibility of the end. He argues that the belief in the apocalypse is one of all ages “Even the scholar who studies crisis as a recurrent, if not perpetual, historical phenomenon, tends to single out ours as the major instance” (95-96). Looking at one of the earliest apocalyptic narratives, the book Genesis in the bible, the concept of the apocalypse as an ending portrays the inherent contradiction of the end not being the end. Lisboa states, “If you believe in God there can only ever truly be one apocalypse” (20). Lisboa’s usage of the word apocalypse relates to the biblical meaning of the word apocalypse meaning the revelation of heavenly truths. However, the apocalypse as an ending is no longer reserved for the realm of God. The atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima showed that humanity had obtained the power to destroy the world. The notion of an apocalypse caused by humanity became more prevalent within disaster literature as can be seen in novels such as *I am Legend*, *Triffids*, and the short stories like “When Day is Dun” and “Lemmings”.

The many crises throughout history have led to different apocalyptic narratives such as the religious apocalypse, the romantic apocalypse, and the technological or secular apocalypse. Perhaps the most famous example of the religious apocalypse is John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) which is a retelling of the fall of Adam and Eve in the bible. In this well-known tale of Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden by God after eating the forbidden fruit and thus committing

the original sin. Their fall is arguably one of the earliest apocalyptic narratives and explores the apocalypse not as the physical end of the world but rather a spiritual one wherein they lose. In the Romantic apocalypse there is often a return to nature in the form of the idealization of the pastoral way of life. During the age of industrialization, the eighteenth and nineteenth century, there were many writers who, weary of industrialization, yearned for simpler times and a return to a rustic form of life, as can be seen in Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885). Many other writers and directors have produced works that use a technological or secular approach to the apocalypse, such as Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954), Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), *The Terminator* (1984) directed by James Cameron, John Wyndham's *Triffids* (1951). Often these narratives show the end of the world because of irresponsible or uncontrollable technology, either intentionally or accidentally. As is the case in *The Terminator* wherein humanity, accidentally, creates the sentient program Skynet which then launches every nuke possible, thus effectively unleashing a nuclear apocalypse. Skynet and the killer robots it creates are used as a metaphor for the fear of technology. Mary Shelley explores this topic in *Frankenstein* (1818), in which Victor Frankenstein creates a being that becomes a monster. Frankenstein is asked by the monster to create a woman for him but refuses, he is afraid that they would become an abominable Adam and Eve and eventually replace humanity. It is here, in Shelley's work, that a more natural and responsible usage of science and technology is advocated in order to prevent an apocalypse. The diversity and topical nature of apocalypse scenarios show that contemplating the end is something that has been done throughout history.

Whether the apocalypse explores secular or religious notions, almost all the apocalyptic narratives provide a critique on existing social orders. As James Berger states in *After the End: Representation of Post-apocalypse*:

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic representations serve varied psychological and political purposes. Most prevalently, they put forward a total critique of any existing order. . . . From the book of revelation's condemnation of Babylon, through the millenarian movement through the Middle Ages, to more recent apocalyptic thinking – both religious and secular – visions of the end and the aftermath emphasize that no social reform can cure the world's diseases. Every structure of the old world is infected, and only an absolute, purifying cataclysm can make possible an utterly new, perfected world. (7)

The apocalypse is an event that does not merely end society but rather gives it a second chance to try again, the apocalypse is merely the beginning of something new, as can be seen in the many apocalypses that occur in the bible such as, the original sin, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra, the book of revelations (St John) and many more. In the Bible another example of the world that has grown so corrupt can be found in the book of Genesis. 6:5 "The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." God punishes the wickedness of man by flooding the world. "Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; people and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark" (Gen. 6:23). However, the flood shows the duality of the idea of an apocalypse as being an end and a new beginning. God promises to Noah, "The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). Although humanity has been plagued with disasters, wars and diseases, one might say that God has kept his promise to Noah and his family. Up to World War II, only an omnipotent being such as God had the power to destroy the entire world. This changed with the invention

of the nuclear bomb and was demonstrated on the 6th of August 1945 with the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Noble et al. 894). Humanity attained a destructive power that tore the notion of an apocalypse from the realm of myth and squarely positioned itself as a force capable of ultimate destruction.

Just how the notion of the secular apocalypse differs from the Judaeo-Christian concept of the apocalypse can be seen in the predictions of Rapture and the notion of the Day of Judgement. In Judaeo-Christian narratives the apocalypse usually leads to utopia. In Christian religion the expulsion is usually seen as the very first apocalypse (Lisboa 8). As God casts out Adam and Eve “So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken” (Genesis 3:23). With this verdict the first apocalypse is set in motion. Both Adam and Eve lose their utopia and have to start working the land to feed themselves. However, as is common in apocalyptic narratives, an apocalypse also provides a path through that which is most feared, namely the end. It safeguards an arrival at a state of safety after an apocalypse which one might define as utopia (Lisboa 151). In this the biblical notion of the apocalypse differs from the secular apocalypse that I will discuss in my thesis, as in the secular apocalypse there is no guarantee that a utopian state will be reached after an apocalypse. Both works that I will analyze will show that the apocalypse may also lead to a (new) dystopia which then in turn will be destroyed in an apocalypse, only to start the cycle anew.

Looking at the world, according to the Judaeo-Christian beliefs, it could be said that our world today is a post-apocalyptic world in which we are still working towards reaching utopia. This utopia can, presumably, be reached by living according to Judaeo-Christian standards. The expulsion of Eden was the first apocalyptic event and started humanity’s road to redemption and it is this road that defines it as an apocalypse. As Berger states, “The end itself, the moment

of cataclysm, is only part of the apocalyptic writing. The apocalypse as eschaton is just as importantly the vehicle for clearing away the world as it is and making possible the post-apocalyptic paradise or wasteland” (6). It is this paradox, that the apocalypse is not the end, but merely a start of something new that is the common trait of apocalypse narratives.

The biblical notion of the apocalypse can be seen in many stories within the bible such as, The Fall, The Flood, The Exodus with Moses and in St. John’s book of Revelation. The apocalypse as portrayed in the book of Revelation (St John) is a spiritual ideal that is concerned with the afterlife. It shows that after the destruction of the physical world there is the possibility of attaining the afterlife, or heaven. The biblical apocalypse occurs when there is no cure for society except for a great culling of the “unworthy”. It is through the apocalypse that it becomes possible to reach a utopian state, or heaven. As can be seen in St John’s book of revelations:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.

(Rev. 21:1-6)

In his vision St John sees a new heaven and a new earth because the previous heaven and world has been destroyed in an apocalyptic event. Even the landscape of earth has changed and there

is no longer a sea. However, the destruction has led to a utopia in which there will be no fear, sadness or even death. St. John's revelations show that a utopia is not just a story of death and destruction which ends but it is a necessary road in order to reach utopia. It can be argued that the biblical apocalypse is primarily a spiritual apocalypse in which the afterlife, or heaven, can be reached.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a prime example of a text that explores the biblical meaning of the apocalypse. *Paradise Lost* is the tale of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. For Adam and Eve their expulsion signified the end of life as they perceived it and were forced to adapt to an suddenly changed reality as can be seen in God's verdict for Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit in *Paradise Lost*:

I charged thee, saying: Thou shalt not eat thereof,
 Cursed is the ground for thy sake, thou in sorrow
 Shalt eat thereof all the days of thy life;
 Thorns also, and thistles it shall bring thee forth
 Unbid, and thou shalt eat the herb of the field,
 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,
 Till thou return onto the ground, for thou
 Out of the ground wast taken; know thy birth,
 For dust thou art, and shalt to dust return. (10.200-208)

Adam and Eve had known nothing but prosperity and lived in the utopia Eden where everything was provided for. After being cast out of Eden they were faced with a new world in which they had to work the earth, with all its unpleasantries such as thistles and thorns, for their food and perhaps most importantly, they had now lost their immortality and would face death. The apocalyptic event they experienced resulted in them understanding and knowing evil, thus jeopardizing their immortality and immortal soul. Their original sin resulted in destroying

man's future in God's Eden. However, they were faced with a reality of the apocalypse, a reality that was similar to almost all apocalypse narratives, namely, the fact that although the apocalypse referred to the end of the world it very rarely was. As Lisboa states:

Almost without exception, from the Ancient Greeks and the Bible to contemporary science fiction, in the aftermath of Armageddon, following near-global destruction (whether brought about by divine wrath or by dangerous scientific advancement – eg. nuclear power), there is usually enough left over to permit a new beginning: as suggested before, at the very least one man, one woman, some representative animal and plant species and enough resources to sustain them and ensure continuity. (8)

This is especially true for Milton's version of the Fall. Even their punishment, to perpetually work the land is, in the end, something that allows Adam and Eve to survive their new world. For Adam and Eve their apocalypse is a spiritual apocalypse concerning the afterlife which they can obtain after the loss of Eden.

The original apocalypse, as portrayed within Judaeo-Christian belief, is an apocalypse that follows a linear pattern in the sense that an apocalypse will eventually lead to something better, whether this is in the form of heaven or the cleaning of the material world in order to provide the opportunity to start afresh and create utopia. This cycle, wherein apocalypse ends in utopia, is present in the bible, the book of revelation (St John) and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. However, the apocalypse that can be seen in, for example, post-World War II literature shows that the apocalypse has become secular in nature. The apocalypse is no longer a punishment by God nor is it controlled by Him, humanity is now technologically advanced enough to unleash their own apocalypse. Now the apocalypse is no longer solely a tool of God the nature and result of the apocalypse have also changed. The apocalypse in post-World War II literature is often a technological apocalypse in which mankind is responsible for its own

undoing. The inherent self-destructiveness of humanity is, as Patrick Parrinder argues, a typical Science Fiction trope that can be loosely summarized as to challenge the self-destructiveness that is inherent in humanity through technological evolution (72). With the development of nuclear weapons humanity has gained the destructive power to create a man-made apocalypse. This technological apocalypse is an event that will not lead to an utopia, but rather repeat itself as a cyclical phenomenon throughout human history. Human hubris and the illicit use of technology will inevitably lead to a scenario of apocalypse in which humanity, and not God, is responsible for the destruction of the old as can be seen in the novels that I will analyze in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: The Atomic Bomb in Historic Context

As established in the previous chapter the concept of the apocalypse has changed from a non-secular to a secular notion. This change is largely because of the technological and scientific breakthroughs throughout human history. However, arguably the largest impact on the secular notion of the apocalypse, as can be seen in post-World War II disaster literature, is the discovery and weaponizing of the atom. In order to better understand the implications and consequences of this technological “advancement” within the narratives of *I am Legend* and *Triffids* I will provide a historic framework in which to place the technological aspect of the apocalypse within these novels.

In the seventeenth century, the ideology emerged that the utility of science and exploitation of nature should only be done to benefit humanity. This can be seen in the writings of Francis Bacon (Dehart 407). According to Bacon, “The ideal of human service is the ultimate goal of scientific effort, to the end of equipping the intellect for a better and more perfect use of human reason” (407). Bacon saw the subject matter selected to achieve this end should be that “which has the most for the welfare of man” (407). In the immediate post-war period the most important scientific “advance” made, was the development of nuclear power. According to McClellan and Dorn, “science-based technologies have proven to be powerful agents of social change and have revolutionized the way a significant portion of humanity now lives” (392). The nature of science based technology can be double-edged as seen with the discovery of antibiotics and the atom. Antibiotics have, to a certain extent, benefitted mankind. The discovery of the atom has led to both advances in energy and technology but also to the possibility of a fast world destruction by mankind. During the twenty and twenty-first century the success of government and industry has led to great “advancement” in both technology and science and the wide spread consequences of the advancements in science and technology

would have extraordinary repercussions. This shaped and came to define post-war anxieties in the West and a new chapter within disaster literature.

In 1938 the German physicist Otto Hahn (1879-1968) demonstrated that certain heavy elements (such as Uranium) could fission and split and in 1939 Lise Meitner proposed a theoretical explanation that showed the potential destruction that could come forth out of an explosive nuclear chain reaction (McClellan and Dorn 393). The upcoming war in Europe soon made nuclear theory into a field of interest for Allied scientists. In the 1941 President Roosevelt started a large scientific project with as goal to develop nuclear weapons. This project would be the Manhattan Project (McClellan and Dorn 394-395). The success of the Manhattan Project resulted in the dramatic ending of World War II with the deployment of two nuclear bombs (McClellan and Dorn 394). The development of the atomic bomb showed the potential of turning theory to practical end. The authorization to use of the atomic bomb came from the American president Truman. Truman, who came into power after Roosevelt's death in 1945, had known nothing about the Manhattan Project prior to his inauguration (Houghton 895). In just a few months he had to decide whether or not to use this new weapon of mass destruction. Realizing it could shorten the war (and reduce American casualties) he first warned the Japanese that they should surrender or face devastation. The Japanese ignored his warnings and were subsequently bombed by the Americans. Truman hesitated to deploy the bomb perhaps because he realized that it would unleash something into the world that could never be taken back. As Herbert Feis states, "as the news of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima astounded and upset the world, both the President and Stimson had issued statements about our efforts to create the bomb were exultant, awesome, and somber. The genie – good or evil – was out the bottle" (94). The diction used in the statements made by Truman and Stimson "exultant, awesome, and somber," show that the government realized that although the war had been ended because of the use of the bomb it now became increasingly important to govern the bomb in relation with

the international community. For it was obvious that, as relations between the Russia and the USA were crumbling, a scenario of atomic warfare could only lead to a nuclear apocalypse.

As tension between the Soviet Union and the United States was rising, the implication of nuclear warfare became increasingly clear. With the Soviet Union and the USA developing ever new and more powerful weaponry the fear of an accidental launch that would hurl the world into a nuclear apocalypse was only growing. Although men like Robert Oppenheimer and Charles Thomas, vice-president of the Monsanto Chemical Company, advocated for an establishment of a World Authority with positive as well as negative functions. They knew, and feared, that nations would not shrink from pursuing the atomic weapon because of mere agreements that were struck by the Soviet Union and the USA (Feis 107). With multiple parties seeking the upper hand over the other, the arms race that became the Cold War started to turn grim. The conflict between The Soviets and the USA moved beyond mere political systems with capitalism versus communism and became to be portrayed by political leaders such as Truman, to be a struggle of good versus evil. Perhaps the best example of this shift from allies to mortal enemies can be seen in President Ronald Reagan's speech on March 8, 1983, at 3:04 P.M. This speech shows the almost puritan approach to the nature of communism which was prevalent during the Cold War (Lisboa 22): "There is sin and evil in the world, and we're enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might." Particularly possessed of that sin and evil, he told the National Association of Evangelicals, was the USA's principal foe: the Soviet Union was the "focus of evil in the modern world"; it was an "evil empire." It was this *zeitgeist* that made the Cold War into an era in which the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists believed (and unfortunately today, yet again) that the world was on the brink of a nuclear apocalypse. It was, and is now, two for twelve and, as I will show in the next chapters, it is in this spirit that John Wyndham's *Triffids* and Richard Matheson's *I am legend* were written.

Chapter 3: The Sustainability of Society in *The Day of the Triffids*

In *Triffids*, the world ends overnight, or better put, changes overnight. The majority of the world population is struck blind by an event of an ambiguous nature. Bill Mason is one of the few who is not affected, because he happens to be in the hospital after being stung by a Triffid. When Bill removes his blindfold he is faced with a world wherein the majority of the world went blind. The blind become unable to find food and are doomed to either starve or get eaten by the Triffids. However, a starving population is not the only thing Bill has to contend with. The Triffid, a genetically engineered, flesh-eating, plant life-form, stalks the world and quickly becomes the apex predator of Great Britain. Bill meets Josella Playton soon after the apocalypse, a sensible, pragmatic woman and they quickly fall in love. However, their budding romance is abruptly paused when Josella is kidnapped by a group of blind people looking for people with sight to act as guides for food and supplies. Bill sets off on a romantic quest to find his love but ends up one step behind for a long time. On his journey he encounters various people all trying to rebuild the world in a different fashion after the disaster. When he finally finds her his quest is not over. Now he must find a way to survive the hostile world overrun by Triffids.

Triffids is at heart a quest narrative that adheres to the traditional quest conventions. In his article, "Quest Fantasies", W.A. Senior explains that the traditional quest is one wherein the average man is faced with a collapse of stability and embarks on a grand "adventure." He goes on to explain that "choice is crucial in quest fantasy, so protagonists face several cruxes where their choices determine the fate of many" (190). Although Bill embarks on his grand adventure he does not seek to help the many but rather only one. Bill, as the protagonist, does not fit a heroic profile. He undertakes a quest to save his girlfriend but is by no means a hero. He can even be characterized as an anti-hero. According to Sean O'Faolain, in *The Vanishing Hero* (1956), an anti-hero is a practical "hero" whom does not act out of purely benign intentions but

rather out of self-interest and wishes to live by his own personal code rather than according to a heroic code of conduct (12). Bill fits this description because he does not actively seek to warn people about the Triffids nor does he set out to save as many blind people as he can but rather sets out to save his girlfriend. Bill's nature, as I will show in chapter four, is similar to Neville's nature in *I am Legend*, is one of traditional masculinity. He is skilled, intelligent and fearless and, also similar to Neville, Bill is very much a human with failings. As Senior states there is often a dark lord or villain in a typical quest fantasy (190) but in the end it would seem that not the Triffid serves as the great antagonist in the story but rather human nature. As I will explore, Bill's character traits possess the seeds that could possibly lead to a repetition of the apocalypse.

The societies within the narrative all eventually fail and despite an initial rise they all prove to be unsustainable in the long term. The cyclical rise and fall within the narrative can be juxtaposed to the body of thought of Oswald Spengler in *The Downfall of Western Civilization* (1924), in which he argues that all great civilization rise and eventually fall (17). If all societies inevitable fail and lead to an apocalypse perhaps Wyndham believes that it is not a specific type of society that can prevent the apocalypse and lead to utopia but rather a specific type of individual. Bill is a self-made man and Bill's identity appears to be fluid in the narrative. In a pre-apocalypse society, he was a successful biologist, in this particular function and field he had acquired his scientific skills and was able to support himself. Nevertheless, when the apocalypse strikes he soon realizes "My way of life, my plans, ambitions, every expectation I had had, they were all wiped out at a stroke along with the conditions that had formed them" (47). For Bill the collapse of society allowed him to reinvent himself. In the pre-apocalypse world Bill was a man whom, in Barrett's terms, was a being that only performed his particular function so that he became identified with that function, the rest of his being dropped below the surface (31). He became much more than his specific, limited profession when he was

confronted with a world that required a man with a much broader skillset. And Bill relishes that idea:

All the old problems, the stale ones, both personal and general, had been solved by one mighty slash. Heaven alone knew as yet what others may arise – and it looked as though there would be plenty of them – but they would be *new*. I was emerging as my own master, and no longer a cog. (47)

Bill shakes off his feeling of estrangement and casts off what Barrett calls, the identity of the modern man (31). He is no longer a man who has lost his connection with his spiritual identity through the bureaucratized, impersonal mass society. He is instead thrown back, not on a complex society, but on his own skills and identity. Bill has, in a way attained a post-human state in the world, which according to Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, means that he has attained freedom of the will of others (286-287). Bill can become a self-made man in which his skills and mindset are all that matters. However, even Bill appears to be tied into the repetition of history and is doomed to repeat his own failures. His new identity does not seem to constitute a new society. The apocalypse presents an opportunity to change but it does not guarantee it as can be seen at the very end of the narrative when it is not his newly acquired self-made man skills such as farming and building that become essential but rather his pre-apocalypse skills as a scientist. In the end Bill's specialized pre-apocalypse skills as a scientist are what will define him in the war against the Triffids. A war he is willing to wage with his skills as a scientist and research into, what we can surmise, to be new weapons. In the end, Bill has not learned from the apocalypse and has entered a new Cold War scenario against the Triffids.

In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama states that: “ The twentieth century, it is safe to say, has made all of us into deep historical pessimists. Our own experience

has taught us, seemingly, that the future is more likely than not to contain new and unimagined evils, from fanatical dictators and bloody genocides to the banalization of life through modern consumerism, and that unprecedented disasters await us from nuclear winter to global warming” (3-4). As World War II ended and the Cold War began, people struggled with the anxiety of a possible World War III. To avoid anxiety, people turned to consumerism to simply stop thinking about a possible nuclear attack or to disassociate themselves from politics (Mathews, et al. 78-79). Although humanity had already witnessed both the destructive power of nuclear weapons with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the willingness to use them in armed conflicts it still remained difficult for anyone to truly envision the end. Envisioning the possible end is useful because by contemplating the end humanity may find a way to avert it. As Lisboa states, “And what could be more urgent than the imperative of understanding the possibility of an end?” (12). Wyndham explores the inherent values of British society in the 1940s and 1950s through the narrative of *Triffids* while at the same time warning against any form of complacency with regards to the terrible destructive power of the new weapon known as the atomic bomb.

Society as a concept is heavily intertwined with the concept of culture and these notions cannot easily be separated. As Roy F. Baumeister states in *The Cultural Animal: Human Nature, Meaning and Social Life*, society is made up of cultures and all people are evolutionary and biologically wired to live in a cultured society. This means that it is human nature to seek out or create societies if one has lost the society they inhabit. After meeting up with Josella, Bill starts what Baumeister calls a “social” state wherein he interacts only with those very close to him, his family and protégé. However, Bill recognizes that there is a danger in living without society because, as Baumeister states, “Another crucial fact is that humans are always better off in most respect (including physical health, mental health, and longevity) when they live in a cultural society than when they live isolated or alone” (20). This becomes doubly true when

the characters in a perpetual siege by murderous plants. During the narrative, Bill encounters various societies which shows that, just as Baumeister argues (10), “culture is learned behavior, it is the set of beliefs, practices, institutions, customs, myths, and the like that has been built up by a group of human beings and passed along from one generation to the next”. It is always based on frameworks of the past such as, Christianity, feudalism and ecologism in the novel. The inherent danger of seeking or creating a new society is that of a repetition of the past. Something that Wyndham explores through Bill’s expression of the war he feels he needs to wage in order to retake the world from the Triffids. Bill showcases that the evolution of society is something that is not guaranteed and can lead to both progression and regression of the world. Disaster literature serves as a vehicle to not only warn of possible dangers regarding scientific hubris but also of the inherent dangers of creating or altering society.

An apocalyptic narrative often explores values of contemporary society. Through the destruction of the pre-apocalypse society and all concepts such as race, gender roles and contemporary values of society it becomes possible to create a utopia. As Lisboa states, “the establishment of utopia almost without exception demands a radical purge” (15). However, Wyndham explores not the requirements for a utopia, but rather humanity’s inability to ever establish one. Although social orders collapsed and the remaining people have the opportunity to discard social constructs such as, justice, order and compassion, they fail to create a new, better, society. Rather than learn from the past they try to recreate the very social systems that once led to a situation in which the apocalypse occurred in the first place. Throughout the narrative Wyndham experiments with a number of societies. Although *Triffids* follows the general apocalypse narrative conventions wherein, despite the Triffids and green flashes that turn the majority of the world population blind, there is enough of a healthy, unaffected, population that permits a new beginning. *Triffids* deviates from the biblical notion of the apocalypse wherein an apocalypse ends in utopia. In the end in *Triffids*, similar to as I will

discuss in chapter four, *I am Legend*, the apocalypse does not end in utopia. Wyndham shows that whatever society is chosen they all have the same commonality, all are products of humanity. As Lisboa states, there is also, “enough left of the old mind set to justify the fear that, once survival is consolidated, the factors which led to near-miss destruction in the first place will also be reinstated” (8). Both narratives, *I am Legend* and *Triffids*, explore the apocalypse not as a guarantee for utopia but as a road to dystopia. In the end of both *I am Legend* and *Triffids* it is human nature, with all its flaws, that causes mankind to march off to a new, possible, apocalypse.

Wyndham explores the concept of efficacy of short term vs. long term planning within the narrative as can be seen in the various attempts to rebuild society according to social systems such as, the traditional religious group, socialism and democracy. As each group struggles and eventually fails to establish a long term society the weaknesses of these societies become apparent in the narrative. These forms of society are known to embody different traits such as the traditional religious group values compassion, the socialist values the notion of equality and democracy values the right to choose elected leaders and members of the government. The narrative of the apocalypse explores the inherent value or feasibility of these systems. In “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction” Darko Suvin argues that science fiction often uses the aptitude of estrangement to reflect on normative, pre-apocalypse values in a world that is in need of a new, changing set of values (374). Wyndham explores various societies and uses the concept of estrangement to reflect on the practicability of these systems in the context of the apocalypse. In the post-apocalyptic society it is important to contemplate which values of the old world must be kept and which one must be forgotten.

The struggle short term vs. long term planning can be seen in the traditional religious group of Durrant. Her community actively seeks out any living person, whether afflicted or

non-afflicted by blindness. They are based in a manor which can be made to sustain a group of people indefinitely, if the right steps are taken. When Bill first sees the house he reflects on the architecture:

It rambled over a considerable ground area and through a variety of building styles as though none of its previous owners had been able to resist the temptation to leave his personal mark upon it. Each, while respecting the work of his forefathers, had apparently felt it incumbent upon him to express the spirit of his age. A confident disregard of previous levels had resulted in a sturdy waywardness. It was inescapable a funny house, yet friendly, and reliable looking. (141)

The community at the manor represent the traditional religious group in *Triffids*. A house upon which every generation, or owner in this sense, leaves their personal mark shows that the traditional religion, as depicted in the narrative, is something that can be changed depending on the time or culture it resides in. The waywardness of the building reinforces this as religion has been used waywardly depending on the time. Durrant wishes to establish a settlement with Christian values. These Christian values appear to reinforce gender stereotypes, such as the helpless, technology averse, female, which results in women that do not know how to use technology and also not desire the knowledge to use technology. However, technology is something that cannot be avoided in Wyndham's narrative. This can be seen when Coker discovers the engine that lies unused in a shed and would have been able to power the entire manor. Because of Durrant's need to adhere to her unchanging Christian identity the people in her community are unable to rise to the challenges of the apocalypse. In order to survive, they need to discard their traditional religious gender roles such as the technological averse female and become a person who is able to utilize whatever they can in order to survive this new world no matter their gender. The apocalypse in *Triffids* shows a lack of the divine and Durrant's

adherence to Christian dogma is shown to be destructive to the welfare of the citizens of her community. It would appear that in *Triffids*, there is no God that will save them from the perils of the new world. Her failure to see that the world has changed through the apocalypse prevents her from judging the merits of many of her values. Although she acts compassionately towards the blind it remains the question just how long they might survive the Triffids or lack of food. In the end, although Durrant saves them from immediate death, she is most likely unable to consolidate their survival. The traditional religious approach to society will not sustain their community in the long term as their dependence on God for a miracle or to carry them off to rapture is not happening. In the post-apocalyptic world many of the values inherent to traditional religion can be detrimental to your chances of survival.

Estrangement and short vs. long term planning can also be seen in the socialist society within the narrative. According to Andrew Heywood's *Political Ideologies*, "the central, and some would say, defining, value of socialism is equality, especially social equality. Socialists believe that social equality is the essential guarantee of social stability and cohesion, and that it promotes freedom, in the sense that it satisfies material needs and provides the basis for personal development" (99). The socialist group is led by Coker, a man who wishes to aid as many as he can. He believes that those that can see have a moral responsibility to aid those that cannot. "These people here have got just as much bloody right to live as you have, haven't they?" (83). However, his speech betrays a question in his statement, as he states, as you have, haven't they? Coker wishes to establish a system where each seeing man or woman leads a party to stores or other locations that still have food. However, as an opponent to his ideas states, "fact of it is you're scared – scared to show 'em where the food is. And why? Because the more these poor devils get to eat, the less there's going to be for your lot. That's the way of it, isn't it? That's the truth – if you had the guts to admit it" (83). The struggle between them is one of short term vs. long term planning. Although it is noble of Coker to try and sustain the blind people, it will

not be feasible in the end because food production will not be able to keep up with the demand and as existing supplies run out they will still starve in the end. Socialism in the novel will lead to the same dead end as Durrant's traditional religious society.

As both socialism and traditional religion fail, Wyndham explores a regression to a pastoral society. Pastoral society has been a staple in science fiction literature. As Suvin states, "The pastoral is essentially closer to SF . . . SF has thus much to learn from the pastoral tradition, primarily from its directly sensual relationships without class alienation" (376). The pastoral society involves a return to nature and the triumph of the humble man living in harmony with nature. Bill and Josella retreat to Shirning farm, a farm that is more a country house than an actual farm. "The word 'farm' had become a courtesy title for the place" (186). The farm had become a retreat for Londoners from their busy city lives. Already Wyndham seems to comment on the status of the pastoral way of life. As the farm is presented as a fake farm. Wyndham explores the pastoral society as an alternative to contemporary society and other forms of society previously mentioned. The pastoral society, which Bill tries his hand at, has at its basis the notion of self-sustainability. Bill learns how to use agriculture to feed his family and succeeds to a certain extent. However, just as both the traditional religious society and socialism fail, so too does Bill's pastoral way of life fail on the long term. Bill struggles to survive in a world overrun with Triffids and the triffids show that nature is not benevolent. As William Barrett states in "The Encounter with Nothingness", "History has never allowed man to return to the past in any total sense. And our psychological problems cannot be solved by a regression to a past state in which they had not yet been brought into being" (22). Barrett and Wyndham agree on this as can be seen in Bill's pastoral way of life which fails as he is forced to abandon his farm. A pastoral society which revolves around self-sufficiency appears to be the most successful in the narrative. However, it would not appear that a true pastoral society is the answer for the new world. Bill is forced to give up his life as a farmer when his farm is at

risk of being overrun by *Triffids* and returns to his pre-apocalypse profession as a scientist. *Triffids* reveals that a pastoral idyll is in fact something of the past and in order to truly move forward humanity cannot simply regress back to a society of the past.

As Wyndham explores multiple options for the post-apocalyptic society, he also experiments with democracy as a form of society. Fukuyama argues that one of the central pillars of democracy is the right to choose your own leaders and rational self-government (4). In *Triffids*, Bill and Josella encounter the colonel and Michael Beadley. They wish to rebuild the world and society. They do not propose grand social changes but rather remain very close to the contemporary 1940s and 1950s society. In fact, the only change they seem to propose in this apocalyptic narrative is the abolishment of marriage laws. In the post-apocalyptic world, practical morality, such as polygamy, is apparently the best chance of survival. Any form of democracy offers choice to its population and this is also the case within Beadley's society. "There is no compulsion. The choice is yours. Those to whom our offer does not appeal are at perfect liberty to go elsewhere, and start a separate community on such lines as they prefer" (102). Beadley offers perfect liberty indeed. His offer is ironic in the sense that he basically offers a choice between life and death. The choice to either join or die is, of course, no choice at all. The democratic system Wyndham explores in his novel reveals his critique of the democratic system wherein choices may often not be choices at all. Beadley and his party wish to isolate themselves and succeed in doing so when they colonize the Isle of Wight as the new cradle of civilization. However, the irony of the novel is that they only seem to isolate themselves more and more. Even those that do not agree within their own community are re-located to an even smaller island. In the end the only thing Beadley and his democratic society are able to create is an isolated society which mirrors the very ideals that set in motion the apocalypse that once destroyed their society. As Bill states, "and we danced, on the brink of an

unknown future, to an echo from a vanished past” (105). Bill understands that despite the almost ending of the world nothing has really changed and the repetition of history is almost inevitable.

If the destruction of a society is necessary to be able to review the inherent value of that society, it would almost appear that the apocalypse is something to be desired, since through an event such as an apocalypse, we can rethink our values and possibly improve as a society. However, the narrative of the apocalypse is specked with horrifying scenes of suicide and starvation and showcases the scale of destruction that would accompany a world ending event such as the apocalypse. The people that end up blind, starving or serve as food for the monstrous Triffids, experience their (unknowing) doom as both alluring and scary: “the sky’s simply full of shooting stars,’ she said. ‘All bright green. They make people’s faces look frightfully ghastly. Everybody ‘s out watching them, and sometimes it’s almost as light as day – only the wrong colour” (6). Wyndham’s diction foreshadows the cataclysmic consequences of watching the “shooting stars.” The people do wish to see this “once in a lifetime event” but also seem to realize, at least at some level, that it is an unnatural event. Ironically, the nurses open the curtains in order to allow even the sick wards to fully experience the very *last* once-in-a-lifetime event. The result of the unnatural event is strikingly displayed in the very first sentence of the novel, “When a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere” (1). The people who watched the comet debris, if that is what it actually was, in the sky suddenly go blind and are no longer able to sustain themselves. The world has changed overnight and for those that are unable to change with it only an unavoidable death awaits. Wyndham shows the price of change in the suffering and mass death toll that follows on the green flashes or comet debris. Throughout the narrative, the characters try to develop a perfect, or at least a better, society but Wyndham shows that at the very core radical changes in society have a tremendous cost in human lives.

Wyndham explores the consequences of the illicit use of technology and nature. Even before the start of the green flashes the first seeds of the apocalypse had already been sown. Nature within *Triffids* undergoes a change which can be analyzed through the eco-critical lens of Carolyn Merchant's *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. In her book, Merchant argues that nature exists in three instances, at liberty, in error and in bondage (82). In Wyndham's narrative nature appears to be a mixture of nature in error and bondage. Nature in liberty grows free and without any unnatural interference of man and is, in general, either harmless or even beneficiary to man. In the narrative of *Triffids*, the Triffid occupies a mixed nature of both error and bondage. In its erroneous state nature, in the form of the Triffids, turns into a monster, harmful to man, but not evil, since they are simply following their nature without any guidance from either man or God. The Triffids represent a nature that is not benevolent to man. Science created the Triffid to be beneficial to man. However, they eventually break out and become the dominant species in Great Britain. They have become a form of nature that, although created to benefit mankind, have broken their constraint. If nature in Wyndham's novel is explored through Merchant's eco-critical lens then the Triffids seem to occupy a mixed position that showcases their paradoxically unnatural nature and it is this unnaturalness that is one of the first signs of the approaching apocalypse. Despite the fact that the Triffids were created in order to relieve the world food problem, the Triffids can rightly be called an abomination. Through the narrative of the apocalypse Wyndham, similar to Matheson, explores the possible consequences of what could happen when humanity tampers with nature.

The Triffids are artificially created plants and personify the consequences of an artificially augmented nature. Because of man's interference, nature changes from a submissive state into a conscious predatory state as can be seen when the Triffids break out of plantations and gardens. Just as humanity was blind to the danger of the "comet debris" (18) so too are they blind to the danger of the Triffids. Even Bill Mason, a Triffid expert, misjudges the nature of

the Triffids, as can be seen when he recounts his first experience with the Triffids: “. . . it is difficult to recall how odd and somehow *foreign* the first ones appeared to us. Nobody, as far as I know, felt any misgivings or alarm about them then” (27-28). The Triffids are becoming self-aware to some degree and are able to communicate, lay traps and learn from their mistakes. They become a self-learning, self-replicating swarm that devour any mammal they come across, whether that being is human or animal. The realization that the Triffids are more than just mindless hostile works of nature comes when the Triffids are analyzed by Bill and his company: “They couldn’t do that here until conditions made it possible. They didn’t even try. But when they could, they did it *at once* – almost as if they *knew* they could. ‘Come now, be reasonable, Dennis. Just think what you are implying,’ I told him” (202). Nevertheless, Bill, who is the Triffid expert, does not realize or believe that the Triffids are more than simple plants: “I wish, ‘I told her, irritably, ‘you’d not keep on saying “they hear”’ as if they were animals. They’re just plants” (202). However, the Triffids are definitely not “just” plants, they learn and communicate and are always looking for weaknesses to exploit. It is only at the end of the novel that Bill recognizes the Triffids for what they are, a twisted and unnatural form of nature. Concluding this, the only solution for Bill is “. . .to drive the Triffids back and back with ceaseless destruction until we have wiped the last of them from the face of the land that they have usurped” (233). The diction in this scene is warlike, “the ceaseless destruction” and the use of the word “usurped” create an image of the arch enemy that has stolen, or usurped mankind’s destiny.

Wyndham explores the need for a more responsible use of nature by mankind in the narrative. Nature as saviour in the narrative comes in the form of agriculture which is essential for the survivors. After the majority of the world population goes blind there is a mad dash for food in order to survive. However, the food stocks in the city quickly run out. Soon Bill and Coker start to realize that in order to survive long term they need to start growing crops: “money

isn't important any longer, but time is. They ought to be thinking about the harvest, rigging a mill to grind flour, seeing about winter feed for the stock" (156). Coker understands that it is imperative to quickly start developing their own agriculture system and become self-sufficient. Cultivating nature in this sense is their one chance at surviving and during the narrative growing your own crops and utilizing nature in a responsible way becomes an important element in the narrative. The idea of agriculture is, as Merchant states, part of the mechanics of man where man can utilize nature not by force but only by obeying the natural laws (82). This idea is much more in line with coexisting or cooperation with. Bill starts to learn how to farm, "At the same time I was endeavoring to learn the a-b-c of farming. It is not the kind of thing that is easily learned from books" (196). From this point on, there is a change in the state of humanity. Whereas the illicit use of science and nature caused the apocalypse and put nature in a steady decline with the rise of the Triffid, now nature and man can attempt to rebuild society. However, the act of cultivating nature sets in motion the very development that eventually led to the creation of the Triffids.

Similar to nature, technology serves an ambiguous role in Wyndham's apocalyptic narrative. As Bill deduces, the green flashes, which turned most of the world population blind, were most likely not a natural event but actually weapons of mass destruction:

I find it that it's just the wrong side of coincidence for me to believe that out of all the thousands of years in which a destructive comet could arrive, it happens to do so just a few years after we have succeeded in establishing satellite weapons – don't you? No, I think that we kept on that tight-rope quite a while, considering the things that might have happened – but sooner or later the food had to slip. (212)

Similar to Matheson, Wyndham explores the cyclical nature of human civilization with the inevitable rise and fall of human civilizations. Wyndham explores the concept of the inevitable

apocalypse through the narrative, as is seen in the definitive remark that Bill makes, using the line, “sooner or later the food had to slip,” the imagery of a vehicle that is spinning out of control becomes apparent in this scene and is a metaphor for the fear of scientific hubris of the 1940s and 1950s. For Wyndham technology and weaponry have evolved to such a scale that controlling their destructive power becomes impossible. As Lisboa states, “Even ultimate unwillingness for destruction, therefor is not risk-free, but in any case, as discussed, even outside the sphere of terror, while the wherewithal of destruction exists, either unilaterally or bilaterally, the potential remains for human or machine error, as depicted in many other films” (26-27). The use of technology and especially the idea of weaponizing technology is something that in Wyndham’s vision can lead to the end of the world, whether intentional or unintentional. Wyndham, just as Matheson, shows that the apocalypse could be just one mistake away. The narrative of *The Day of the Triffids* shows the inherent dangers of weapons of mass destruction in the context of the Cold War: “It was by no means pleasant to realize that there was an unknown number of menaces up there over your head, quietly circling and circling until someone could arrange for them to drop – and there was nothing to be done about them. Still, life has to go on – and novelty is a wonderfully short-lived thing” (20). Wyndham’s choice of words – “pleasant,” “quietly,” “life has to go on,” “novelty is a wonderfully short-lived thing” – underline the gravity of the situation by ironically addressing the satellite weapons using diction that reinforces the irony of the situation with weapons that could wipe out humanity. Wyndham shows the great irony that life did *not* go on in *Triffids*. Technology in the narrative shows the potential uncontrollability of technology and its consequences.

In Wyndham’s narrative, technology is not solely something to be feared and he shows that technology can also be embraced in order to thrive or even survive. Contrary to Matheson’s *I am Legend*, technology is essential in order to survive the harsh apocalyptic world. With the rise of the Triffids, mankind needs to fight to survive. However, it is the irony of the novel that

the development of weapons has led to the apocalypse in the first place. Wyndham also explores the beneficial utilization of technology in the narrative to show the ambiguous nature of technology. This ambiguous nature is further explored when Bill reflects on the biotechnical advancements made over the years:

Perhaps it sounds like a golden age – though it wasn't quite that to those that lived in it. Or they make think that an earth ordered and cultivated almost all over sounds dull – but it wasn't that, either. It was a rather exciting place –for a biologist, anyway.

Every year we were pushing the northern limit of growth for food plants a little farther back. New fields were growing quick crops on what had historically been simply tundra or barren land. (19)

The diction in this scene trivializes the feats of biological engineering, as described in the narrative. By using diction such as “looks like” and “sounds dull” he shows that although it would seem like a “golden age” it is, in fact, *not* a golden age. The act of pushing back the geographical limits to raising crops is an incredible feat and this feat of biological engineering is beneficial to mankind. However, the irony is that the Triffids were also made through biological engineering and turned out to be detrimental to humanity. Wyndham explores the inherent dangers of biological engineering and provides multiple examples of biotechnology that have both harmed and aided humanity. Technology, as envisioned in Wyndham's *Triffids* is something that is not inherently evil but needs to be handled with responsibility because it always carries the risk, or perhaps the inevitability, of going out of control.

The concept of ambiguity is further reinforced when looking at the role of weaponry within the novel. Bill's own attitude regarding weaponry is captured in his reasons for arming himself, “Since I was sixteen my interest in weapons has decreased, but in an environment reverting to savagery it seemed that one must be prepared to behave more or less as a savage,

or possibly cease to behave at all before long” (127). Bill suggests that being interested in weapons is something that is typical when one is prepubescent, implying that weapons should no longer interest someone when they become a functioning adult. For Bill weapons symbolize a useless violence that should not exist or be utilized once you become a rational adult capable of reasoning. However, Bill also realizes that his old prejudices regarding weapons are no longer valid in a rapidly changing, savage, world in which the old values have been erased due to the apocalypse. Bill recognizes the necessity of weapons but does not glorify weapons as can be seen in his picked weaponry. He chooses a practical shotgun with the idea of being able to shoot the tops off the Triffids and in doing so render them harmless. Weapons for Bill serve more for fighting off the abominable Triffids than harming his fellow man. Bill recognizes that weaponry and weaponized technology is what caused the apocalypse but also understands its value in an apocalyptic world, as nature in *Triffids* is not benevolent. When Stephen (a minor character that Bill encounters on his search for Josella) is analyzed, it becomes clear that he is someone who glorifies weapons. Stephen fortifies an old manor and utilizes multiple machineguns and mortars and is disappointed when he realizes that he will not have to fight off other people. As Bill remarks:

Had ten or fifteen percent of the population remained unharmed it was very likely that little communities like this would indeed have found themselves fighting off starving gangs in order to preserve their own lives. As things were, however, Stephen had probably made his warlike preparations in vain. (166)

Stephen is geared up and ready but misidentifies his enemy. What Stephen fails to realize is that due to the apocalypse all conventional rules regarding society and pre-apocalypse threats have changed. He is ready to fight off other humans but they are not the enemy. Bill, unlike

Stephen, is able to see that the greatest threat is no longer another human in the apocalyptic world of *Triffids* but rather the new predatory Triffid.

In conclusion, Wyndham employs the literary device of the apocalypse to explore sociopolitical themes, such as democracy and socialism, and human hubris the apocalypse as a literary device in order to consider the possible impacts of ever evolving atomic and biological technology on the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations. Wyndham's *Triffids* shows the consequences of scientific hubris in a world wherein humanity has lost control of technology. The Triffid, designed as something to be beneficial to humanity has now turned against humanity and replaced it as the apex predator. The Triffids show that nature is not benevolent and should be respected. Wyndham explores a variety of societies and in the light of short vs. long term planning and sustainability every conceivable form of society fails. In the end whether socialist, traditional religious or a democracy, they all fall short of bringing an utopian age. Bill shows that although he is able to cast off his traditional role of the modern man during the narrative he, at the end, is unable to truly become a man that is able to learn from past mistakes and adopt an identity that could lead or build a utopia. In the end the narrative reflect the pessimistic state of the 1940s and 1950s Cold War era as an era that is heading towards either a nuclear apocalypse or at least a dystopia. Wyndham creates a full circle within the narrative with many attempts of new societies such as traditional religious, socialistic and democratic, but in the end the apocalypse fails to do that which its name implies, namely to end the world as we know it. Although the world in Wyndham's narrative suffered and lapsed, society as we know it rebounds and for better or worse persists. Even Bill, the man who was able to adapt and envision a new way of life, reverts back to his pre-apocalypse role as scientist. Wyndham shows that the end of civilization is something that in the end cannot be avoided. As scientific hubris fuels the technological advancement the risk of an accident that could influence the entire world, or possibly end it, will become increasingly greater.

Chapter 4: The Inevitability of the End in *I am Legend*

In *I am Legend* Robert Neville struggles to survive after a virus has turned the majority of the world population into a vampire-like race. Where Bill, in *Triffids*, at least had Joselle and other humans, Neville is truly alone. Similar to Bill who had a tolerance to the Triffid poison, Neville is immune to the vampire virus. Faced with a world wherein horror has become reality, Neville struggles to come to terms with his role in this new world. At night he is besieged by vampires who are trying to kill him. In order to understand the nature of the vampires, Neville turns to a gothic fantasy novel as his frame of reference. He classifies the inflicted humans as vampires and treats them as one would treat a monster, with death and destruction. Alone and miserable he turns to drinking and almost loses himself to his self-destructive habits. Eventually, he turns to science to better understand the virus and possibly even find a cure, by finding a purpose he saves himself from his own worst tendencies. However, the novel is ironic in nature and instead of achieving some sort of salvation or finding a miracle cure, he starts to mirror the scientists who, in their hubris, lost control over their own inventions. Neville fails to realize, until the very end, that he has turned into a relic of the old humanity and represents the pre-apocalypse world with all its shortcomings.

I am Legend is a quest narrative that, contrary to *Triffids*, does not adhere to the traditional quest conventions as stated in the previous chapter. The nature of the quest of *I am Legend* is ironic in nature because Neville is not the hero, or even the anti-hero, but rather the villain of the novel. The ironic quest narrative explores the dangers of scientific hubris in which the goal of pursuing knowledge may be beneficial, but the eventual result might be detrimental to humanity. With the creation of the atomic bomb, it now becomes only more apparent where science-based technology has led humanity, namely to the brink of a possible nuclear apocalypse. Neville is on a quest to make sense of the virus and possibly conjure up a cure for, what he perceives as, the abominable vampires. However, he succeeds only in emulating the

hubris of the scientists and is unable to discover anything of value. In his hubris he believes he can succeed where the world's scientist have failed. Neville's hubris and his self-destructive tendencies, such as his excessive drinking, turn him into a failed hero. Unable to change, nor accept the new reality, he fails to notice that he has turned into a relic of the past. He turns out not to be the hero, but rather the monster, an eerie being that drags the new vampire-like humans out of their bed and murders them without so much of a trace (106). The notion of scientific hubris and its consequences is a major theme within the novel *I am Legend*.

Neville's failure to understand the nature of the vampire-like race and the cause behind the transformation from human to vampire-like being is part of the reason he transforms from protagonist to antagonist. Although Neville casts himself into the heroic role of grand saviour of mankind, it is the great irony of the novel that at the very end, it is Neville who turns out to be the monster. As Matthew, et al. states, "Instead of becoming the great hero he ends up becoming the scapegoat that must be sacrificed in order for the new world to be born" (32). Both the virus and vampires are deemed evil by Neville and he tries to vanquish them. Neville fails to realize that what he is trying to do is not better, but worse for mankind. Mankind unleashed the virus that changed the biological make-up of humanity and it evolved into, what Neville perceived as, vampires. For better or worse, the vampire-like state of humanity has become the new status quo. The virus Neville wishes to understand or even cure is not evil or righteous, it is merely part of the new reality.

The notion that society has changed and with it, the concept of normalcy can be seen in Neville's nature and his descriptions of the vampire-like race. While Neville considered the vampire-like race monsters, they in fact represented the new status quo. As Louise Nuttall states, in her article "Attributing minds to vampires in Richard Matheson's *I am Legend*", "Neville uses the indistinct 'they' (1) to first refer to the vampires. Since 'they' is used, without an antecedent it cues an indistinct, undetailed conceptualization of the vampires. The vampires

start out as a neutral ‘*they*’ (1) in chapter one but quickly go from neutral to being called ‘*Filthy bastards*’ (4) within the first chapter” (29). The diction that describes the vampires is infused with horrific imagery, not only in their appearance but also in the diction which is used to describe their actions, “grisly,” “slithering,” and “grating” and such. The nature of these adjectives and adverbs showcases Neville’s attitude towards them. Through their portrayal the reader is invited to accept Neville’s, sometimes brutal, actions against them. The ironic narrative provides the reader with glimpses of Neville’s nature. The flashbacks within the narrative are a structural principle that help foreground the irony. As can be seen in the depictions of Neville and his struggle to make sense of his changed reality.

It is not the vampire, but Neville who is the odd-one-out in the new world; he is the monster: “He was an invisible specter who had left for evidence of his existence the bloodless bodies of their loved ones. And he understood what they felt and did not hate them Full circle. A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever” (160). For Neville the vampires are not humans to be cured, but instead anonymous impediments to his success. Neville’s descriptions of the vampires lure the reader into feeling compassion with Neville and less so, if not at all, with the vampires. According to Noël Carroll, in “The Nature of Horror”, “in works of horror, the humans regard the monsters that they encounter as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order” (52), Within the narrative of *I am Legend* Neville views the vampire-like race as abnormal. However, it is the great irony that Neville turns out to be the abnormal one. In a world wherein vampire-like humans have become the new status quo Neville has become the odd-one-out. For the vampire-like human that encounter Neville he is the one that appears to disturb the new natural order by hunting and killing the newly evolved human race. It becomes clear that Robert Neville has become the monster in a world in which the concept of normalcy has been turned upside down.

The apocalypse within the narrative shows how the world is transformed through the unintended consequences of science. The uncontrollability of science-based technology has proven itself the ultimate agent of change. Similar to *Triffids* the apocalypse in *I am Legend* provides the reader a scenario in which mankind has lost control of technology. For Neville science has not only failed to stop the virus from destroying the world, but perhaps even worse, failed to save his wife and child. As Neville states, “It was thinking of the past that drove him to bottle. He was just going to have to accept the present” (52). In the past there is only failure and loss for Neville and reminiscing about the past only leads him to a self-destructive habit of drinking himself into a stupor. This is part of the ironic narrative structure in which the narrator turns out not to be the hero but the villain of his own tale. However, accepting the past is only possible by a better understanding of the world as it is now and not as it was. Neville tries to succeed where the world’s scientists failed and begins to study both the virus and the vampires and in his attempts he reproduces the hubris of the original scientists. His quest to a better understanding leads him to the Los Angeles Public Library. Inside the library he looks at the chairs that are neatly arranged. Neville imagines a librarian who, at the very end, still took care of the library. The maiden librarian Neville imagines symbolizes Neville’s view on science:

The day the library was shut down, he thought, some maiden librarian had moved down the room, pushing each chair against its table. . . He thought about that visionary lady. To die, he thought, never knowing the fierce joy and attendant comfort of a loved one’s embrace. To sink into that hideous coma, to sink then into death and, perhaps, return to sterile, awful wanderings. All without knowing what it was to love and be loved. (68)

The powerful imagery in this scene shows science as the passionless, almost inhuman, librarian. A being that lives for the sake of knowledge and not for the sake of living. Science is not in service of humanity but in service of knowledge itself in Neville’s view. This is what he learns

throughout the narrative. That science and what counts as knowledge within the discourse of science is a human construct. His views are proven by the fact that science was unable to stop what it very possibly created. Even the act of pushing the chairs against the table is something that, in the light of humanity dying out, seems to be pointless. The figure that Neville envisions, the keeper of knowledge, is one that loves or serves knowledge for the sake of knowledge and not as a means to improve humanity. Matheson presents his critique of science as a force which has advanced to a level wherein scientists have achieved the power of the Gods yet lack the control necessary to responsibly handle such power.

I am Legend reflects on the anxieties and fear of the Cold War era regarding the possibility of a nuclear apocalypse. The apocalypse as presented in the narrative is not mere horror and is used to present the culture of the 1940s to 1950s. According to Matthews, et al., “science fiction is never created in a vacuum. It reflects the current and past social issues and experiences of the author” (74). In *I am Legend*, Matheson’s own experiences of World War II, in which he personally witnessed the horror of war as a soldier of the US infantry on the frontlines in Germany, influenced many of the novels and short stories he wrote in the 1950s (Jorgenson 75). His experience with the horror of the war and the anxiety of the Cold War culture can be traced in the representation of the apocalypse in the narrative of *I am Legend*. The apocalypse is caused by humans and it is this notion of the technological apocalypse which is present in many of his works such as “Lemmings” (1958), “When Day is Dun” (1954) and “Descent” (1954). All three of these works feature the end of humanity caused by human hands. In “Lemmings”, humanity commits suicide by walking into the sea, in “When Day is Dun” (1954) there is only one man left alive after a nuclear apocalypse and in *Descent* people have to choose whether to hide in the earth or stay on the surface and die because of an imminent nuclear apocalypse. In all of these scenarios it is ultimately humanity which is responsible for its own demise.

The feeling of despair and anxiety regarding the possibility of a nuclear strike that could end the world during the 1940s and well into the 1950s led to the vogue of existentialism: “The existentialist explored what it meant to be human in a world cast adrift from its cultural moorings, with no mutually accepted guideposts, standards and values.” (Noble et al. 908-909). It is this feeling of loss of society and the fragile identity of man in a Cold War context that is represented in *I am Legend*. In the narrative, Matheson experiments with the relativity of concepts such as identity, the social sphere and the concept of normalcy. Relativity as a social concept can be seen in fashion or in political preferences throughout the ages. What was once the norm may now be undesirable or vice versa. However, it is important to realize that all of society’s standard values, such as compassion, ethics and right and wrong are merely social constructs envisioned and created by humanity in order to allow humanity to construct a society. They are, according to this concept, susceptible to change. The apocalypse shows that social constructs can be changed through an apocalyptic event. According to Matthews, et al. some authors and directors such as, Romero and Matheson use the uprising of the dead in order to challenge or destabilize artificial cultural logics, such as masculine gender roles, by dismantling the various structures that support them (37). The relativity of such constructs can be explained by using the Identity Control Theory as is envisioned by Peter J. Burke. According to this theory, identity and social concepts alike can be tied to the social environment. “Traits of identity such as, American, spouse, or honest can change in identities and the Identity Control Theory thus refers to changes in the meanings within the identity standard”. The narratives of both *I am Legend* and *Triffids* explore the social constructs that make up identity within the framework of the apocalypse. Matheson uses this framework in order to provide his critique on established values of identity such as the concept of masculinity within society.

Neville embodies an ideologically prescribed gender role of the typical American male. Prior to the outbreak Neville was a hardworking man and a provider for his family. He was able

to maintain his car, soundproof the house, fix his generator, self-taught scientist and exterminates vampires. He appears to be the ideal man with a can-do attitude and is an embodiment of the American Dream. It is his masculinity, skills and traits that are inherit to being a masculine man in *I am Legend* and these traits allow him to survive in the post-apocalypse world in which he resides. “No, by God, he had no intention of going on like a blind man, plodding down a path of brainless, fruitless existence until old age or accident took him. Either he found the answer or he ditched the whole mess, life included” (48). This passage however, shows the irony and critique on this value system. As in the end he did not find an answer and he did live a fruitless existence. According to Matthews et al., his character represents a critique on this value system as can be seen in his heavy drinking and self-destructive habits. (36). He is an excessive smoker, drinker and loses himself frequently in rage. In fact, in one of these acts of self-destruction he nearly succeeds in destroying himself and the safety he created:

Fury exploded in him. Enough! His rage palsied-hands ripped out the clothes from the bureau drawer until they closed on the loaded pistols. . . I’m coming out , you bastards! His mind screamed out. . . It wasn’t until the flaring pain of having his shoulder slashed open struck him that he realized what he was doing and how hopeless the attempt was. (35-36)

In this scene it becomes clear that Neville is no longer in control of his emotions. His anger has become the agent of his action and, as Justin J. Roberts states in “Transforming the Hero of *I Am Legend*”, “Neville is at his essence, a man of action. He is not a thinking man, but a man of action, his compulsion to action leading to his eventual demise” (43). His inability to reflect on his actions and consider the possible consequences ensures that he is unable to break out of the cycle of violence and hubris. Matheson explores through Neville’s identity the notion that

typical American masculinity is in the end not a form of identity that will be able to break the cycle of apocalypses. Neville in the end is unable to do anything and dies without any sort of contribution towards the legacy of mankind.

Unlike Bill, in *Triffids*, Neville is unable to rebuild society and has become a relic of humanity. He has become the worst that humanity has to offer. As can be seen in his desperate attempt to catch and help the dog: “To Robert Neville that dog was the peak of a planet’s evolution” (84). The dog represented a chance to win back a sliver of the world he lost. The dog, a man’s best friend, would offer him something that even his feverous pursuit of science and knowledge could not offer, a friend and companion in a world devoid of kindness. The dog represents the warmth that humanity has to offer and Neville, “Because he wanted the dog, because he needed the dog” (86). The dog represents companionship for Neville. It is ironic that Neville cares more about the dog than he does for the vampire-like humans. For Neville, however, it is not the state of the dog that he perceives, but a semblance of normality. “To Robert Neville that dog was the peak of a planet’s evolution” (84). In this scene it is clear that Neville does not understand that reality has changed. The peak of evolution is not a scrawny dog but the newly evolved humans that Neville sees as monsters. With the death of the dog Neville loses his last link with humanity.

Matheson explores the cyclical phenomenon within world history where humanity is destined to exist in a pattern of re-occurring apocalypses. It is scientific hubris which will always lead to science-based technology which cannot be controlled. Neville believes that the virus, which caused the apocalypse, originated from germ or biological warfare.

Nobody knows what it is?’ ‘I doubt it. If anybody did they’d have surely said so by now.’ ‘But they must have *some* idea.’ Everybody’s got an idea. But they

aren't worth anything.' 'What do they say?'" He shrugged. Everything from germ warfare on down.'....The war's over,' he said. (45)

Neville's suspicions reflect the anxiety regarding weapons of mass destruction in the 1950s. The Cold War era was in part characterized by the arms race between the Soviet Union and the Allied Nations, as stated by, McClellan and Dorn "The political, scientific and military-industrial establishments of the United States and the Soviet Union raced to develop larger atomic weapons" (394). Matheson explores the notion that science has become uncontrollable through the narrative of *I am Legend* as humanity experiments with things they cannot control the end has become inevitable, whether by accident or purpose.

According to Lisboa, the notion of mutual assured destruction through the use of weapons of mass destruction serves as a deterrent to war: "an alternative scenario, however, might involve ending the game by check-mating the opponent. Within the framework of nuclear war, however, check-mate would mean that endgame really would be the *last* game. Or, in historical terms, the end of the world" (26). Indeed with the destruction of the world there would be no one to claim victory. When the United States tried to introduce laws and control groups to regulate production and ownership of Atomic weapons they tried to reach an accord which all three factions could live by, America, the United Nations and the Soviet Union. However they were unable to reach an accord and when the Soviet Union was able to manufacture and successfully test their own Atomic weapon they knew they had entered a fragile equilibrium (Feis 398-400). As Feis states, when the Soviets successfully developed their atomic bomb, "The Soviet scientists knew they had made a weapon for their own country to protect the peace of the world They had knocked the trump card out of the hands of the American atomic politics" (400-401). The idea that total destruction is not a possible option coincides with the body of thought of Lisboa. As she states, "In order to be so afraid of it that

we ensure it never happens, we first need to imagine it, to believe it really is possible” (23). The people in the narrative of *I am Legend* were unable to believe in the apocalypse and were unable to respond and when they finally accepted the virus as a threat it was already too late. “And before science had caught up with the legend, the legend had swallowed science and everything” (17). Matheson explores the notion through the narrative of *I am Legend* that the power of the atomic bomb can never truly be controlled.

Just as Icarus who died because he, in his intoxication, spurred on by hubris, flew to close to the sun and caused his own demise (Greek Gods and Goddesses), so too is there a danger in ever-evolving science and technology. In a time of atomic testing and rapidly advancing weaponry it becomes clear that science and the development of weaponry can lead to dangerous and unpredictable situations. In the narrative this is explored through the release of the vampire virus which was an unintended result of (possible nuclear) bombings. Humanity has obtained ultimate, atomic, power but is unable to control it. As becomes clear when close reading the flashback scene between Neville and his wife Kathy:

Maybe the insects are . . . What’s the word? Mutating.’ ‘What’s that?’ ‘Oh it means they’re . . . changing. Suddenly. ‘Jumping over dozens of small evolutionary steps, maybe developing along lines they might not have followed at all if it weren’t for . . .’
Silence. ‘The Bombings?’ She said? (43-44)

The conversation shows the unnatural effects of science in which the grasshoppers become abnormally large. Grasshoppers have been responsible of devouring entire harvests and are traditionally seen as harbingers of disaster and death. As can be seen in the Bible where God punishes the Egyptian pharaoh by unleashing locust on them “And the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over Egypt so that locusts swarm over the land and devour everything growing in the fields, everything left by the hail.” (Ex. 10:12) and The 1977 movie *The Exorcist*

II: The Heretic wherein a demon has the ability to control locust and uses them to attack people or devour harvests. The difference between a divine/demonic apocalypse and a technological, secular apocalypse is that the latter is caused by humanity itself whereas the first is caused by a godlike being as can be seen in both Moses and the demon's apocalyptic powers. The notion of accident and the uncontrollability of science is tied to the notion Gods vs. Humans, as humanity has gained the godlike power to destroy the world but lacks the ability to control it. The idea that an accident could lead to mutations or unexpected results is often used in disaster literature and underlines the unpredictable nature of science. Within the novel it is clear that hubris has led to innovations and technology that are too dangerous and uncontrollable for humanity.

The most frightening aspect of science lies perhaps not in its potential for destruction, but rather in its uncontrollability of its consequences. In the narrative Neville surmises that the end of the world was not initiated by a rogue nation or insane dictator but was rather an unintentional consequence of a nuclear bombing. Matheson uses the narrative to imply that science should always serve mankind. As long as science and the resulting technology serve mankind it becomes *possible* that science could actually contribute to the advancement of mankind. When science is pursued without regard of actual practicality the risk of science going out of control is only ever growing. Science in the narrative has reached a level of destruction where an invention, or weapon has the power to influence the world on a global scale and it is the sheer scale of both weapons and technology that shows Matheson's warning in the immediate Cold War Context. Matheson shows that although scientist have reached the scientific level where inventions such as the atomic bomb could start an apocalypse they, contrary to God, lack the necessary control. By striving to reach this scientific level they will, inevitably, lose control.

In conclusion *I am Legend* explores the inevitability of the apocalypse in an ironic narrative structure. In Matheson's vision, hubris is engrained within our DNA and any attempt to rebuild a society after an apocalypse will inevitably lead to the establishment of a dystopia. Hubris is the defining human trait within this scenario and it is this trait that will lead to ever advancing technology, which in turn will lead to uncontrollable technological inventions such as the atomic bomb. Neville's identity and transformation from hero to villain showcases the idea that as long as humanity survives in whatever form, a new civilization will always be built upon the same frameworks of values as the previous one, which will ensure that empires will always rise and fall. The apocalypse in *I am Legend* failed to cleanse the world and merely transformed humanity in a race which at its hearth differs too little from the old humanity. In the end Matheson provides the reader with a dystopian vision of an unescapable future. It is this pessimistic vision that reflects the culture of anxiety of the 1940s and 1950s.

Conclusion

It is within the classical apocalyptic narrative tradition that through the destruction of the old world a new, better, society is built. Society can try again through an apocalypse and reach utopia. This is the case in Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, as now people can choose between good and evil and in doing so redeem themselves in the eyes of God and attain a happiness greater than they could have had in Eden. However, both Wyndham and Matheson explore the apocalypse as cyclical, unavoidable, phenomenon within human civilization. Both Wyndham and Matheson's narratives are products of the Cold War culture of fear of the atomic bomb and their experiences with war and nuclear technology. It is the culture of the 1940s and 1950s wherein, with the fear of a looming World War III, humanity it seemed, would never learn from the horrors of the previous World Wars, it is this culture and anxiety which shapes their narratives. Both Wyndham and Matheson present a pessimistic scenario of the apocalypse in which the apocalypse is both unavoidable and will not lead to a better world. In both literary works it is human hubris that in the end will lead to ever advancing technology which, ultimately, will become uncontrollable and result in a technological apocalypse. Matheson explores this concept with the vampire virus, which is an unintended result of military technology and Wyndham showcases this in *Triffids* when military satellites turn the majority of the people blind and scientists develop the Triffids which, in the end, turn against their creators.

Within both narrative humanity is locked in an unending cycle of apocalypses because of human nature. As can be seen when Wyndham's *Triffids* and Matheson's *I am Legend* society ends in dystopia rather than in utopia. In *I am Legend* the road from apocalypse to dystopia can be seen in Neville and how he deals with the apocalypse. When Neville finally realizes that he is the last of humanity and that the vampires are simply the new status quo and not a race of monsters he understands that at last humanity is done for. He has not been the best humanity

had to offer, but rather a personification of the self-destructive habits of humanity. The new race of vampires has become the dominant species of the world. However, the vampires are nothing more than evolved humans and already they betray their origins in the sense that they have not learned from the past. Already their race has sown the seeds of a repetition of the apocalypse. As Lisboa stated, humanity is its own worst enemy (41). The worst traits of humanity are still present in the nature of the evolved vampire-like race. As they chant for Neville's death it would seem they have learned very little from the mistakes of the past. They act out of hate and fear and however justified their hatred or fear might have been towards Neville, it also shows they are unable to break the cycle of violence. As the vampire-like race shows, through their brutal actions against both Neville and the wild vampires, that they have learned nothing and merely repeat the ways of the pre-apocalypse world. Humanity may have evolved in *I am Legend* but has changed very little.

The narrative of *Triffids* has a similar pessimistic outcome. Wyndham experiments with multiple forms of society but in the end not one is able to reach a utopian state. The novel explores the notion of short vs. long term planning and shows that in the long term systems such as the traditional religious, socialistic and democratic society cannot sustain humanity. Wyndham explores these types of society and shows them to be lacking traits such as practical morality that would make them long term sustainable in the end. At the end of the narrative society reverts back to the same pre-apocalypse form of government. Wyndham shows, similar to Matheson, the cyclical nature of the apocalypse in which humanity will simply proceed from one apocalypse to another. Even Bill, a man that was able to reshape his identity and cast of the identity of the modern man, reverts back to his original role as Triffid scientist. The irony of the novel is that although Bill seems to grasp the real reason behind the green flashes and is able to deduct that it must have been a malfunctioning military, weaponized, satellite he ends

up researching and possibly developing new weapons to deal with the Triffids. Just as society has learned nothing from the apocalypse, so too does Bill fail to change and break the cycle.

Wyndham and Matheson explore the dangers of science and technology. In both novels the apocalypse is caused by humans and not as form of divine punishment. With the invention of the atomic bomb humanity has gained the power to destroy on an unprecedented scale. In the narratives scientific hubris indefinitely leads to an apocalypse. The scariest notion, however, is not the power or scale of destruction but the uncontrollability. In both narratives the apocalypse has not been a deliberate action orchestrated by a superpower or rogue organization. It appears to have been an accident. It shows that the greater the impact of something like atomic science, the more difficult it becomes to accurately predict its impact. When technology has reached the scale wherein it can impact the entire world, the smallest accidents can have the greatest consequences. The question both narratives seem to ask is whether humanity can deal with such responsibility. A question which is still viable today. Perhaps the power to create an apocalypse would have been better left to an omnipotent deity. In the end the apocalypse is a cyclical phenomenon where the end of one civilization is merely the start of another road towards the end. The end is truly the beginning.

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