






Plague, Nature, Planetary Future: A Posthumanist Reading of *The Scarlet Plague*
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Plague, Nature, Planetary Future: A Posthumanist Reading of *The Scarlet Plague*

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Abstract

This article proposes a posthumanist reading of Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*, and argues that to secure a sustainable planetary future, human beings should understand the posthumanist nature of the world, and learn to respect nature. This article investigates two kinds of worlds, showing a preference for the posthumanist one after the plague over the anthropocentric one before the plague. In the anthropocentric world, the life of human beings is heavily industrialized and isolated from nature, and this causes disaster. However, in the posthumanist world, everything follows natural laws. Human beings are no longer dominators of the world, but share the planet with the nonhuman. In this way, both the human and the nonhuman survive and prosper. Thus, posthumanist thinking provides human beings with a way to make sustainable developments and to build a bright future.

Keywords: posthumanism, anthropocentrism, plague, nature

1. Introduction

The Scarlet Plague is a novel by Jack London. First published in *The London Magazine* in 1912, the story mainly recounts the narrator's experience during a plague in which most of the human beings die. The novel also describes a world after the plague where various creatures prosper. The plague, as a traditional motif, always attracts attention from scholars. As for this novel, in the article "Pandemic Fear and Literature," Michele Augusto Riva, Marta Benedetti, and Giancarlo Cesana (2014) investigate people's "behavioral responses to a pandemic, showing the emergence of fear, irrationality, and selfishness in a previously civilized and modern society" (Riva et al., 2014, p. 1754). Bryan L. Moore also asserts that "Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* functions as part socialist-naturalist rhetorical tract, part ecological novel" (Moore, 2014, p. 59). He focuses on the ecological themes of the novel, and contends "that we humans are but one species among many" (Moore, 2014, p. 45). Loren Goodman (2022) discusses the issue of quarantine as a period of incubation and revitalization, and explores "the relationship between quarantine, social immersion, and literary composition through its interplay of memory, inversion and narrative authority" (Goodman, 2022, p. 1). Many scholars discuss various aspects of the novel, but most of them mainly focus on the plague itself, and rarely pay attention to the posthumanist vision of a new world after the plague. This article argues for the anthropocentric world before the plague

and the posthumanist one after the plague. For our planetary future, human beings should learn to respect the nonhuman perspective, and endeavor to construct a posthumanist world.

2. Anthropocentric Way of Living

In the story, the world before the Scarlet Plague is an anthropocentric one, and people's lives are highly industrialized. Jussi Parikka points out that "the concept of the Anthropocene marks an intertwining of geological Earth time and human history" (Parikka, 2018, p. 51). Rob Boddice proposes that "anthropocentrism is expressed either as a charge of human chauvinism, or as an acknowledgement of human ontological boundaries. It is in tension with nature, the environment and non-human animals" (Boddice, 2011, p. 1). Thus, anthropocentrism is mainly concerned with the impact of human activities on the ecosystem as a whole. In this novel, the world before the plague is a human-centered one. Particularly in the narrator's opinion, human beings are superior to other species, and he takes great pride in human civilization. There is a clear boundary between human species and animals, and the two never share an equal position. During the plague, a pony is found, but the survivors think that the poor creature is "so weak from want of food that it could carry no burden at all" (London, 1912, p. 35). The old man proposes that they can "have it to eat" (London, 1912, p. 35), so they let the horse stay with them. Here the relationship between humans and the animal is an instrumental one. This kind of relationship is based on the economic value of the animal. Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* suggests that this kind of relationship is problematic, as it is "linked to the market economy and labour force" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 70). Here the animal is exploited as a natural slave with human beings as masters. Even its body is seen as a material product. The animal totally loses control over its own life. This kind of hierarchal relationship reinforces the superiority of human beings without seeing animals as living entities.

In the novel, the acts of animals are also misread by the old man's anthropocentric interpretation. This encounter occurred during his search to find other survivors: "it was near Lathrop that, out of my loneliness, I picked up a pair of collie dogs that were so newly free that they were urgently willing to return to their allegiance to man" (London, 1912, p. 39). This description seems to present a scene in which both the dogs and the man need each other, but the dogs have a natural attachment to human beings, and human beings are an essential part of their social life. However, the old man ignores the fact that the dogs go with him just because they have not gotten rid of the habits of following human beings. Later, there are also "the medium-sized wolfish dogs" (London, 1912, p. 39) running in packs with members of their own species. Although dogs are social animals, they gather together with other dogs, not human beings. In nature, dogs do not have to depend on human beings to live. Here again Braidotti defines the relationship between pet and master as an oedipalized one, which is "unequal and framed by the dominant human" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 68). In this kind of relationship human beings take pets' companionship for granted. Human masters always think that by adopting animals as pets, they can provide better

living conditions and care for animals. However, the fact is that it is during the process of domestication that animals lose freedom and have to change their living environment and habits. Animals sacrifice a lot to live with human beings. The two cases above show unhealthy relationships between humans and animals. In the former, the animal is not seen as having a life force, but as a product that can be exploited and consumed. In the latter example, the dogs are seen as pets that have to stay with human beings for their social life. However, the old man ignores the fact that both human beings and animals are parts of nature, and they share the same status as each other. The protagonist regards animals as the accessories of human beings, thus showing no respect to animals and natural law.

In addition to the division between humans and animals, human life is also isolated from nature in various ways. After many years of the plague, the old man always misses the old days, and refers to humans' previous culture as the "glorious, colossal civilization" (London, 1912, p. 17). When he was eating crabs, he recalled mayonnaise that he had not seen for sixty years and that "in those days it was served in every restaurant with crab" (London, 1912, p. 8). Mayonnaise as a kind of sauce is an industrialized man-made product to add flavor to food. The memory of the old man shows that before the plague, people had already lost the ability to appreciate the natural flavor of food. Although the raw materials of these products come from nature, there are no traces of them after processing. Humans live in an unhealthy way, and heavily depend on industrialized products. Moreover, during their escape from the plague, "the women and children could not walk fast. They did not dream of walking, and none of us knew how to walk" (London, 1912, p. 36). It can be speculated that during their previous lives, humans always made use of various vehicles, so when they have to walk, their progress becomes "painfully slow" (London, 1912, p. 36). After the plague, the cars and other automobiles could not operate without gasoline and airships were also destroyed. Without these tools of transport, people could not become accustomed to walking. Motor vehicles are developed to provide convenience for human beings, but for most of the time, people forget that these tools are only accessories and depend on them too much. These kind of unnatural living habits lead to the regression of humans' bodies. People indulge themselves in industrialized products without seeing the hidden problems.

At the same time, the unnaturally large population also causes disasters. Highly developed science and technology causes a situation where "a few men got the food for many men" (London, 1912, p. 15). Excessive population growth and overcrowded cities result from this. Then "as men increased and lived closely together in great cities and civilizations, new diseases arose, new kinds of germs entered their bodies" (London, 1912, p. 18). The more densely people live, the more deadly is the disease. The problem of over-population destroys biological balance. When the earth becomes unable to bear the burden of overcrowded people, it launches a defense. Therefore, the plague can be seen as one of its actions to reduce the burden. The fast-expanding population and the lack of ecological consciousness become a potential danger.

Before the plague, human beings are blinded by the benefit brought about by industry and technology, but fail to notice the problems developing as a result of this, and this leads to the disaster. The old man epitomizes anthropocentrism. When mentioning people's living conditions after the plague, he sighed with pity that "we, who mastered the planet—its earth, and sea, and sky—and who were as very gods, now live in primitive savagery along the water courses of this California country" (London, 1912, p. 48). Even after having experienced a disaster brought about by human beings themselves, the old man still is incapable of having a clear understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. Human beings are not the masters of the planet, but only part of it. If human beings continue with their anthropocentric thinking, their thousands of years of culture and civilization would pass "in the twinkling of an eye, 'lapsed like foam'" (London, 1912, p. 26).

3. The Posthumanist Nature of the World

The anthropocentric way of living is inadvisable because it puts too much confidence in human civilization, which has caused the disharmony between man and nature. To maintain sustainable development, human beings should understand and accept the posthumanist nature of the world, and learn that we are merely a part of nature. Derek Ryan proposes that "posthumanism urges humans to respect and respond to nonhuman worlds and to reject essentialist and hierarchical divisions between culture and nature" (Ryan, 2015, p. 299). Patricia MacCormack also points out that posthuman ethics "sees the world, expansive into the entire cosmos, as interconnected. Individuality is understood as dividuation where each entity exerts force or expression that affects other entities and is simultaneously affected by the expressivity of other entities" (MacCormack, 2018, p. 345). From a posthumanist perspective, human beings are an undivided part of nature, and the human species is embedded in nature.

To understand the nature of the world, one should be aware of the power of natural forces and adapt oneself to the changing environment. This has already been explicitly shown in the world after the plague. At the very beginning of the text, the old man and his grandson Edwin were walking along what once was a railroad, "but no train had run upon it for many years" (London, 1912, p. 3). There is forest on either side of it. The end of a rail has been destroyed by a big tree, and the railroad also becomes rusty with its bed "filled with gravel and rotten leaves" (London, 1912, p. 3). The railway is a human invention, but without the interference of human beings, it has not been able to work for a long time, and could easily be destroyed by natural forces. Also, along this road, the old man and the child meet a bear and a rabbit. The area had once been used to transport human beings, but without human transportation it becomes the territory of animals. After the plague, the human population shrinks sharply. They are no longer the dominant group of the world, and have to share the world with other species. The territories dominated by human beings become the shared space for humans and nonhumans. In this way, human tribes also

return to nature. They have to adapt to the changing environment. When the old man and the child were about to meet the bear, the boy first "smelled things," and then, "his distended, quivering nostrils carrying to his brain an endless series of messages from the outside world" (London, 1912, p. 4). In addition, "his hearing was acute, and had been so trained that it operated automatically. Without conscious effort, he heard all the slight sounds in the apparent quiet" (p. 4). Then "sound, sight, and odor had given him a simultaneous warning" (p. 4) and soon the bear appeared. Then the boy touched the old man and "the pair stood still" (p. 4). Human beings have always been ocular-centric creatures. In the evolutionary process, Sigmund Freud writes, human "adoption of an erect posture" expands his sight, thus he gains an insight to the world: "by means of spectacles he corrects defects in the lens of his own eye; by means of the telescope he sees into the far distance; and by means of the microscope he overcomes the limits of visibility set by the structure of his retina" (Freud, 1961, p. 41). In this way, the human world is largely vision centered. However, when it comes to nature, human beings do not only depend on their sight to survive. In order to deal with different situations, humans have to make use of all five senses and more to get information. There is more than one way to experience the world.

Besides human beings, the condition of different animals also change. When coming to nature, "everywhere they were going wild and preying on one another," and the old man called it "a strange thing" (London, 1912, p. 38). Chickens, pigs, cats, dogs, horses, cows, pigeons, and sheep all become wild. Among them, the pet dogs, the species that live closest to human change most quickly. Before they are domesticated by humans, they are social animals. At first, when they were separated from human society, they were "apart from one another, very suspicious and very prone to fight," (London, 1912, p. 38). However, later they soon "began to come together and run in packs" (London, 1912, p. 38). After leaving humans, the dogs soon recover their original behaviors. In addition, before the plague, there are different kinds of dogs; but afterward, the weak ones are killed by their fellows. When dog breeding, humans have always tried to intentionally retain certain features, however, sometimes these features are unworthy of keeping, or will even do harm to dogs as a species. As part of a natural process, all creatures need to follow the natural law of survival of the fittest, and those features which should be eliminated for the better survival of species disappear naturally. Man-made species are easy to destroy.

In addition to pets, the farm animals also change their living habits. According to the old man, "the cows, when they went wild, went back into the lower mountains" (London, 1912, p. 39). When these animals are kept by human beings, they have no choice of where to live. The aim of humans to raise cows is to get milk, so the living condition created by humans is suitable for getting the largest amount of milk, but this may do no good to cows. However, when cows become wild, they find the best place for the survival themselves. The old man also remarked that, "evidently they were better able to protect themselves there" (London, 1912, p. 39). This is why the cows live in a different environment.

In addition to the changes happening to domestic animals, the condition of wild animals also changes. When entering the wild the old man mentioned that “the coyotes were greatly increased” (London, 1912, p. 40). As predatory carnivores, these wolves used to be wiped out by humans in order to protect farm animals, but once everything starts returning to nature, the number of wolf groups soon recovers from their previous cullings. When human intervening is prevented, everything returns to nature, and recovers its original state. Human-dominated society and nature are two different worlds. When human beings become too arrogant to ignore nature, things that are easy to understand will become incomprehensible for them.

These changes not only affect various animals, but also the land. Before the plague, the field “was all cleared of trees and brush, and it was cultivated” (London, 1912, p. 38). Because only a few human beings escape the plague, the old man remarks that the fruits were “going to waste” (London, 1912, p. 38). However, the meaning of “waste” is defined by human beings. The plants are part of a natural system. Whether humans consume them or not, they will return to the earth and to a natural cycle. With regard to plants, fruit is just fruit. Although it is grown by human beings, it exists to propagate its own species, not to quench human starvation. The same thing happens in the valley. The area which used to be filled by vegetables and orchard trees had been overrun by “weeds and bushes” which “had always [been] fought by man” (London, 1912, p. 40). As the aim of cultivation is solely to support humans, the existence of large, cultivated fields is unnatural. In nature, a piece of land is homeland to various plants and animals, but during cultivation, human beings get rid of everything that will hamper the growth of their chosen plants. This kind of field is against natural laws and is rather fragile. Once it loses its care and cultivation by human beings, it can no longer maintain its farmed condition.

In addition, it is also worth mentioning the posthumanist feature of the plague. As germs are also a part of nature, the plague could also be seen a natural process. The old man is proud of the human inventions of microscopes and ultramicroscopes which could make people see “all these things which our eyes of themselves could not see” (London, 1912, p. 17), but this kind of pride finally becomes arrogant, and people have to pay for it. When the plague began, people in California “were not alarmed” because they were sure that “the bacteriologists would find a way to overcome this new germ, just as they had overcome other germs in the past” (London, 1912, p. 21). However, soon there is a complete loss of control. Human beings have no way to deal with the plague situation. In certain cases, human beings had identified how germs can infect people, and had invented serums to kill bacteria in the human body. However, for most of the time, the old man said, “there were many different kinds of them—more different kinds than there are grains of sand on this beach. We knew only a few of the kinds” (London, 1912, p. 17).

When discussing the pandemic we are currently facing, N. Katherine Hayles points out that “the novel coronavirus is posthuman in at least two senses. First, and most obviously, because it is oblivious to human intentions, desires, and motives” (Hayles, 2020, p. 68). Thus it is with the

plague. First, when the plague occurs, there is no warning. According to the old man, the plague suddenly breaks out. Nobody knows the reason, and because of its rapid infectiousness, people couldn't discover the serum in time to cure it. Second, the Scarlet Plague remains a mystery, and it spreads regardless of people's intention to investigate and contain it. Even sixty years later, the survivors still could not fathom the reason for the germ's contagiousness. In addition, during the plague, some people thought they were free of the contagion, unaware that "the period of the incubation of the plague germs in a human's body was a matter of a number of days" (London, 1912, p. 32). Then, the old man concluded that "the micro-organic world was an invisible world, a world we could not see, and we knew very little about it" (London, 1912, p. 17). Third, the Scarlet Plague is a problem faced by all human beings. It attacks human beings without discrimination. A person can be infected irrespective of their race, class, or gender and so on. In describing his encounter with one of the survivors—the Chauffeur—the old man remarked that he was "a brute, a perfect brute—the most abhorrent man I have ever known," and that "why the plague germs spared him I can never understand" (London, 1912, p. 41). Thus, the plague treats everyone equally. The Chauffeur is a servant whose name people hardly knew, but after the plague, he can marry a woman who used to have a high social position. Although the old man thinks "there is no justice in the universe," (London, 1912, p. 41) the meaning of justice is defined from human beings' point of view rather than from that of nature. The survivors include people of different ethnicities, and people's occupations also varies from illiterate farmers and matrons to bankers and singers. The plague does not spare certain groups. So, the old man said that "everybody died anyway, the good and the bad, the efficient and the weaklings, those that loved to live and those that scorned to live. They passed. Everything passed" (London, 1912, p. 32).

Nature has the power to change everything. It is unwise for human beings to develop in contradiction of natural laws because humans are also a part of nature. To destroy nature is to destroy the human species itself, and when humans do too much harm to the world, nature also has the ability to rearrange everything. In the story, after the plague, human beings are removed from being at the center of existence on the earth. Everything returns to its natural state. Both human beings and animals adapt themselves to the changing environment. In order for development to be sustainable, people should have a better understanding that they are merely a part of nature. When we put ourselves above all other species, we generate a sense of insecurity naturally because we always use a human standard to judge all species. However, this kind of situation is not sustainable. If we understand that we should never dominate the world, we will not be afraid of falling. Just like one of the old man's grandsons, Edwin, who adapts himself well to life in nature, and at the same time tries to learn something from the old man's narrative of previous life, only when human beings learn to respect nature and find a suitable way of developing themselves can they have a bright future.

4. Conclusion

Jack London describes two worlds in the novel: the anthropocentric one and the posthumanist one. In the former, people take pride in their civilization and depend heavily on the products of modern industrialization. As a result, over-population causes the plague. There were only a few survivors and human civilization also “passed in the twinkling of an eye, ‘lapsed like foam’” (London, 1912, p. 26). In the latter, the human species is embedded in nature and adjusts itself to the natural environment. Human beings should remember to follow natural laws when developing, and then they can survive better on this planet.

It is also worth mentioning the symbolic meaning of the Scarlet Plague. Besides the scarlet on their face, a victim would “feel a numbness swiftly creeping up his body from the feet. The heels became numb first, then the legs, and hips, and when the numbness reached as high as his heart he died” (London, 1912, p. 22). The final cause of people’s death is a numb heart. This can be read both physically and symbolically. During the plague, there were mainly two kinds of reaction: “most tried in vain to isolate themselves and fled to avoid the contagion, whereas a minority, mainly rioters, begun drinking, robbing, and sometimes even killing” (Riva et al., 2014, p. 1754). However, either way, most people only want to satisfy their own needs. Therefore, the direct cause of their death is numbness of heart. People become ill because they had “a numb heart” both for nature and themselves.

Sometimes human beings overly rely on their intelligence, and hold the opinion that human civilization is almighty. However, besides the human world, there are worlds of nonhuman species in nature. They have their own laws that work differently from that of humans, and are even more complex. In nature, human beings and other creatures share the same status, and nature has the power to create and change everything. During the development of the human species, we should cease our arrogance in order to learn how to live in harmony with nature, and then we can achieve a sustainable planetary future.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

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