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Exploring Environmental Apocalypticism: Overpopulation in Three Dystopian Short Stories

1 Introduction

In the contemporary world, overpopulation has emerged as a paramount and pressing concern, characterized by exponential population growth that threatens the planet's resources, ecological balance, and the sustainability of human life. This issue has been underscored by historical data indicating that "every second of every day, nine lives are brought into the world" (Sorvall, 1971, 13). Furthermore, the population's rapid expansion outpaces resource production, creating a looming crisis where Earth's available resources may no longer suffice to sustain human life. Environmental scientists have extensively documented the correlation between population density and ecological harm (Poray-Wybranowska, 2021; Morton, 2016). As populations increase, the strain on natural resources and ecosystems amplifies, resulting in heightened environmental damage.

Human overpopulation significantly contributes to this ecological crisis (Crist 2019), increasing resource competition, biodiversity loss, and imbalances. Once a critical focus in scientific literature, discussion about human overpopulation has waned in recent studies (Götmark, O'Sullivan & Cafaro, 2021). In many instances, per capita consumption surges faster than population decline, compounding the environmental consequences of overpopulation (Cafaro, Hansson & Götmark, 2022). Overpopulation also directly impacts the environment through deforestation, habitat alteration, and migration-driven urbanization, increasing carbon emissions and contributing to climate change and global warming. Overall, overpopulation is a significant challenge, emphasizing the need for comprehensive and coordinated measures to safeguard our planet's sustainability.

Environmental activists and theorists have recognized the urgency of addressing overpopulation and preventing environmental degradation. The challenge lies in the failure to acknowledge that nature has irreversibly changed as we entered the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch defined by humanity's transformative global impact. In this irreparable epoch, nature can no longer regenerate or sustain human life



(O’Riordan, 2007, 326; Indriyanto, 2020, 3). Consequently, each new birth contributes to environmental degradation as the growing populations rapidly consume the Earth’s resources.

Overpopulation is also a concern in dystopian literature. Dystopian works serve as a potent commentary on the ecological and societal challenges of excessive population growth, offering a negative perspective on the world’s trajectory to advocate for change (Stableford, 1993, 362). Dystopian authors often use overpopulation as a theme to illustrate its potential impact, focusing on either a Millenarian utopia or an apocalyptic vision, both with profound implications (Vieira, 2020, 356). These themes explore how humanity copes with the collapse of civilization, as argued by Rigby.

[D]ystopian visions of socio-ecological crisis and catastrophe could potentially play a differently valuable role, namely in assisting us to prefigure better and worse ways of responding to disaster, both in the event and in the lead-up and aftermath, thereby helping us to consider strategies for reducing vulnerability, enhancing resilience and acting effectively and humanely during catastrophe (Rigby, 2011, 71–72).

Dystopian narratives often use symbolic places to critique real-world issues, in which an ecocritical framework tries to comprehend humanity’s role in the broader world. Scott suggests that an ecocritical dystopia aims to connect us to present crises rather than predict future catastrophes (2022, 14). This theoretical framework emphasizes the nonhuman (natural) aspect more than the human aspect (*anthropocentric*). Ecocriticism seeks to unravel and critique the conceptualizations that have been so damaging and to identify traces of those better ways of imaging where we find them (Marland, 2013, 847).

To contribute to the discussion of overpopulation in dystopian literature, this section analyzes three selected short stories within the framework of environmental apocalypticism theory. The narratives are “2 B R 0 2 B” by Kurt Vonnegut, “Billennium” by James Graham Ballard, and “Amaryllis” by Carrie Vaughn. These stories share a common thematic thread centered around the danger of overpopulation and its far-reaching consequences on the natural world. Each story delves into a speculative future where population growth exceeds sustainable limits, leading to various societal and ecological crises. In Vonnegut’s “2 B R 0 2 B,” strict population control is enforced to maintain balance. Similarly, Ballard’s “Billennium” shows the consequences of overpopulation in a cramped urban setting. The title carries a dual interpretation, referring to the second millennium or a total population of 20 billion. Lastly, Vaughn’s “Amaryllis” depicts a society managing resource allocation and reproductive quotas to sustain its population, revealing ecological fragility and ethical dilemmas.

Dystopian literature vividly portrays the dire consequences of societal trajectories as a powerful reminder of potential repercussions from unchecked behaviors and choices in the contemporary world. Buell argues that “the apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (1995, 285). The apocalypse trope becomes a potent metaphor to raise awareness about the grave consequences of environmental degradation. For example, in Rachel Carson’s influential work *Silent Spring*, she depicts an American town where the usual sounds of spring suddenly fall silent due to the unintended impact of pesticides like DDT, aldrin, and dieldrin introduced after World War II (Foote, 2007). Environmentalists argue that the loss of birds can create a chain reaction in the ecosystem. Carson’s narrative, using apocalyptic imagery, catalyzed social change in American society:

Silent Spring marshalled an impressive array of scientific evidence to show that this success severely threatened wildlife and human health, confronting the utopian claims of agricultural scientists on their ground. Carson’s scientific claims have since been largely confirmed (although there is still no evidence that DDT is harmful to humans), leading to increased public awareness of pesticide pollution, firmer state regulation and the development of less persistent agricultural chemicals. (Garrard, 2004, 2)

Carson’s narrative heightens awareness of the dangers posed by pesticides and their detrimental effects on the environment, serving as a prime example of how apocalyptic imagery is used. It effectively serves as a metaphor to deepen people’s understanding of the perils associated with technology, a concept that encompasses various human actions against nature, including the issue of overpopulation.

In addition to apocalyptic imagery, overpopulation is a recurring theme in dystopian literature, echoing the ideas of Thomas Robert Malthus, who advocated for ecological-informed social policies as early as the late 18th century. Malthus argues that the population tends to grow exponentially while food production increases only arithmetically. This concept suggests that unchecked population growth leads to societal conflict and resource scarcity and this problem often forms the basis for dystopian narratives (Bergthaller & González, 2018, 2). Dystopian thinkers believe these concerns could become a reality, reflected in their literary works. They engage with pressing global issues, including liberty, environmental destruction, questions of identity, and the relationship between technology and the self (Zamana, Pourgivi & Hashemi 2020, 6).

Furthermore, the issue of overpopulation is closely intertwined with the rapid march of technological advancement, posing an even more significant threat to the environment. The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials

(Indriyanto, 2023; DeLoughrey, 2013). Such pollution remains an inherent consequence of human settlement in previously pristine environments, often relying heavily on chemical compounds. This enduring belief underscores environmental concerns in our contemporary era, which remains a focal concern of dystopian writers.

2 Dystopian representation of overpopulation in “2BR02B”

“2 B R 0 2 B” by Kurt Vonnegut initiates with a vivid portrayal of the idyllic world in which the story unfolds. The opening paragraph paints a utopian picture, free from prisons, slums, asylums, disabled people, poverty, and wars:

Everything was perfectly swell. There were no prisons, no slums, no insane asylums, no cripples, no poverty, no wars. All diseases were conquered. So was old age. Death, barring accidents, was an adventure for volunteers. The population of the United States was stabilized at forty million souls. (Vonnegut, 1962, 59)

This society has triumphed over all diseases, including aging, rendering death an adventure reserved for volunteers. With a stabilized population of forty million souls in the United States, this seemingly flawless world boasts an average life expectancy of one hundred and twenty-nine years. This remarkable feat defies the norms of aging. Everything seems to run in order, and the ideal world that humankind has dreamed of is finally achieved. However, such utopian and perfect societies are built on something darker to sustain them.

Beneath this utopian facade lies a darker reality necessary to sustain this idealized society. The story discloses that population stabilization implies strict adherence to a predetermined number – forty million, no more and no less. In this remarkable world, birth and death no longer serve as mechanisms for population control. The conundrum arises when a child is born into a population that must maintain a precise count of forty million and where death no longer offers a natural solution. This dilemma is articulated later in the narrative as Wehling, the story’s protagonist, confronts an unexpected challenge: the birth of triplets. Triplets present a legal predicament in this society as the law stipulates that for triplets to survive, three volunteers must step forward to embrace death (Vonnegut, 1962, 63). Thus, the rule of this society follows a life-for-a-life principle, which compels people to make grim choices when new life enters the world. This complex moral and ethical quandary forms the core of the story’s conflict.

Wehling's emotional struggle leads to a critical discussion with Dr. Benjamin Hitz, the hospital's doctor, who reminds him of the necessity of this rule. Dr. Hitz offers a historical perspective, highlighting that Earth's overpopulation crisis was once a pressing concern. In 2000, before scientists intervened and enforced strict population control, the world faced severe drinking water and food shortages, leading to mass starvation.

'Would you like to go back to the good old days, when the population of the Earth was twenty billion—about to become forty billion, then eighty billion, then one hundred and sixty billion?'

On the following page, he continues.

'In the year 2000,' said Dr Hitz, 'before scientists stepped in and laid down the law, there was not even enough drinking water to go around, and nothing to eat but seaweed—and still people insisted on their right to reproduce like jackrabbits. Furthermore, their right, if possible, to live forever?' (Vonnegut, 1962, 63–64)

The story gives readers insights into the rationale behind the life-for-a-life rule: Earth's finite resources could no longer sustain the rapidly growing population. Strict population control was established to prevent impending disaster, ensuring that the number remained fixed at forty million, thereby averting resource depletion and future conflicts stemming from scarcity. This life-for-a-life rule applies to newborns and individuals who, for various reasons, no longer wish to live. Such individuals can call the telephone number "2 B R 0 2 B" to schedule their death in a municipal gas chamber, an act considered noble in this society.

It was the telephone number of an institution whose fanciful sobriquets included: 'Automat,' 'Birdland,' 'Cannery,' 'Catbox,' 'De-louser,' 'Easy-go,' 'Good-by, Mother,' 'Happy Hooligan,' 'Kiss-me-quick,' 'Lucky Pierre,' 'Sheepdip,' 'Waring Blendor,' 'Weep-no-more' and 'Why Worry?' 'To be or not to be' was the telephone number of the municipal gas chambers of the Federal Bureau of Termination. (Vonnegut, 1962, 61)

In the story's climax, Wehling's profound disillusionment with his predicament leads him to commit a shocking act: he shoots Dr. Hitz and himself. This tragic act, an attempt to secure a future for his children, encapsulates the grim consequences of a society built on such stringent population control.

“2 B R 0 2 B” follows a classic dystopian narrative structure, exposing a seemingly utopian society that conceals a dystopian underbelly. While it presents an idyllic world free from war, poverty, disease, and death, this facade depends on the grim practice of individuals making sacrifices each time a child is born to maintain a fixed population of forty million. Through an environmental apocalyptic lens, the story shows a future where uncontrolled population growth depletes finite resources, forcing society to sacrifice individuals to sustain reproduction perpetually. This narrative serves as a potent metaphor, warning readers about the dangers of overpopulation and the pressing need for sustainable practices.

3 Spatial dimension of overpopulation in “Billennium”

In “Billennium” by James Graham Ballard, we delve into an alternate perspective on the issue of overpopulation, distinct from Vonnegut’s “2 B R 0 2 B.” Both stories explore the tensions between burgeoning populations and limited resources, albeit with nuanced differences. Ballard’s narrative paints a world where, despite the pessimistic predictions of Neo-Malthusians, global agriculture manages to keep pace with population growth. However, this agricultural success comes at a price. Every inch of land is transformed into a crop-bearing factory floor, as mechanized and inaccessible as an industrial zone:

Despite the gloomiest prophecies of the Neo-Malthusians, world agriculture had managed to keep pace with the population growth. However, intensive cultivation meant that 95 per cent of the population was permanently trapped in vast urban conurbations. The outward expansion of cities had finally been checked, worldwide, former suburban areas were being reclaimed for agriculture and population additions were confined within the existing urban ghettos. (Ballard, 2001, 130)

Unlike Vonnegut’s focus on the necessity of strict population control following Malthusian principles, “Billennium” presents an opposing view where resources seemingly suffice for the growing population. However, it underscores that the world’s dimensions remain finite, creating a conflict over land allocation. In this story, the sacrifice is made by the people. The government mandates that each individual occupy no more than a four-square-meter cubicle, strictly enforced by the Department of Housing (Ballard, 2001, 126). The story primarily centers around John Ward, whose four-and-a-half-square-meter room directly conflicts with this regulation. Ward’s discussions with his friend Rossiter unveil the reasons behind these stringent regulations:

‘What is wrong with the population problem,’ Ward confided to Rossiter, ‘is that no one has ever tried to tackle it. Fifty years ago, shortsighted nationalism and industrial expansion put a premium on a rising population curve, and even now, the hidden incentive is to have a large family so you can gain a little privacy. Single people are penalized simply because there are more of them, and they don’t fit conveniently into double or triple cubicles.’ (Ballard, 2001, 134)

The story critiques how marriage, often seen as a solution for obtaining more living space, inadvertently fuels population growth. This constant population expansion within limited spaces gradually shrinks individual living areas. The absence of population control and the incentive to have larger families for greater privacy has driven population growth. Singles are penalized because they do not neatly fit into double or triple cubicles. Their frustration reaches a tipping point when they learn that the minimum room size will be further reduced to three square meters due to overpopulation. Ward’s outrage is palpable as he curses the government for the overcrowded conditions. It’s in this moment of frustration that an unexpected discovery occurs. Ward punches the wall, and a small wooden panel breaks, revealing a vacant room:

Directly in front of them, faintly illuminated by a grimy skylight, was a medium-sized room some fifteen feet square, empty except for the dust silted up against the skirting boards. Here and there, patches of the paper peeled off and segments of the picture rail had rotted away, but otherwise, the room was in habitable condition. (Ballard, 2001, 134)

In a dystopian world where living space is scarce, Ward and Rossiter’s revelation about the hidden room highlights the fundamental issue of space scarcity. Their initial excitement and subsequent overcrowding demonstrate the pressing problem of limited living space:

For an hour they exchanged places, wandering silently around the dusty room, stretching their arms out to feel its unconfined emptiness, grasping at the sensation of absolute spatial freedom. Although smaller than many of the subdivided rooms in which they had lived, this room seemed infinitely larger, its walls massive cliffs that soared upward to the skylight. (Ballard, 2001, 135)

Their longing for a larger living space and personal freedom motivates them to remain silent about this discovery. Trouble ensues when they invite friends who have been cast out from their apartments to join them, leading to an influx of new residents.

Eventually, the room can no longer accommodate the growing population, and Ward is back in a space no more significant than his initial cubicle. Ironically, Ward adopts the same system he initially criticized by charging rent to the people living in his apartment.

In contrast to “2 B R 0 2 B,” “Billennium” directly portrays a dystopian world shaped by uncontrolled overpopulation. While initially depicting a situation where resources seem to accommodate the population, the story highlights the inherent limitations of a finite planet, making utopian existence impossible. “Billennium” offers a unique perspective on environmental apocalypticism by emphasizing that even when resources can match population growth, it remains crucial to address ecological sustainability. Essentially, “Billennium” serves as a cautionary tale, underscoring the potential repercussions of overpopulation and the critical necessity for environmental equilibrium.

4 Balancing resources and population in “Amaryllis”

“Amaryllis” by Carrie Vaughn offers a unique perspective on balancing resources and population in a dystopian setting. The narrative centers around the fishing ship Amaryllis, captained by Marie. Marie’s backstory, marked by her mother’s controversial decision to have her despite the risks of being exiled and condemned by society, sets the stage for her internal dilemma regarding her worth and existence. A careful allocation of resources characterizes the story’s world through a quota system determined to ensure resource sustainability and prevent overfishing and overpopulation. This system aims to strike a balance between human needs and ecological health, as seen in the subsequent quote by Marie:

‘Tuna,’ I said, by process of elimination. I had never seen one in my life. ‘Bluefin, I think.’

‘No one’s caught a bluefin in thirty years,’ Garrett said. Sweat dripped onto his face despite the bandanna tying back his shaggy dark hair. (Vaughn, 2010)

“Amaryllis” immerses readers in a regulated world where the committee organizes the tenuous equilibrium between resources and population. The system’s core purpose is to ensure that resources suffice for everyone, thus mitigating conflicts arising from resource scarcity. This intricate system harmonizes resource availability with the population’s needs, cultivating a vision of a sustainable ecology.

Conflict emerges when Nina, a young woman from the Amaryllis crew, desires to have a child, knowing that Amaryllis has a good record of obtaining increased quotas. As the ship’s captain, Marie hesitates due to her traumatic past, where her

unwanted birth caused her family to split. This history weighs heavily on her decision-making aboard the vessel. However, the crew's interaction with the scale master, Anders, who continually manipulates the scales to tarnish Amaryllis' reputation, exacerbates the situation. In this regulated society, the role of a scale master is paramount. The ongoing conflict with Anders, who falsely accuses the crew of exceeding their quotas, jeopardizes the ship's reputation. When Nina calls for an audit, it reveals Anders' manipulation, saving the crew from a potentially explosive confrontation with the scale master:

'We'd like an audit,' Nina said, slipping past Sun, Garrett, and me to stand before the stationmaster, frowning, hands on her hips.

'Excuse me?' Anders said.

'An audit. I think your scale is wrong, and we'd like an audit. Right?' She looked at me.

It was probably better than punching him. 'Yes,' I said, after a flabbergasted moment. 'Yes, we would like an audit.' (Vaughn, 2010)

In recognition of the crew's integrity, the committee offers Amaryllis a petition to increase their quota, permitting them to have a child. After initial hesitation, Marie provides the opportunity for Nina, understanding that she already feels like a mother through her relationship with her.

"Amaryllis" introduces a world governed by a system which regulates the balance of resources and population. Unlike the bleak dystopian scenarios of the other two stories, it portrays an almost ideal world ruled by a quota system, showing that conflicts over resources can still arise, irrespective of the system's fairness. Additionally, the story symbolically addresses environmental apocalypticism with the bluefin tuna, believed to be extinct, echoing Rachel Carson's use of the songbird in *Silent Spring* to highlight endangered ecosystems. "Amaryllis" serves as a cautionary tale, urging readers to reflect on their relationship with the environment and the consequences of resource mismanagement.

Conclusion

This reflection on three dystopian narratives – "2 B R 0 2 B," "Billennium," and "Amaryllis" – underlines the representation of possible future worlds shaped by humanity's relentless growth and overpopulation. They underscore the urgency of addressing the complexities of overpopulation and resource allocation. The narratives share a central concern, the consequences of unchecked population growth, urging readers to consider the delicate balance between human needs and ecological sustainability. "2 B R

0 2 B” serves as a stark illustration of extreme population control driven by resource scarcity, “Billennium” depicts a world where resources appear to keep pace with population growth but living space diminishes, and “Amaryllis” showcases a finely tuned equilibrium preserved through a quota system.

The argument underlines how dystopian fiction represents topics such as ecological sustainability, societal equilibrium, and ethical dilemmas in the face of population pressure. As a genre, dystopian literature seeks to reflect and critique contemporary societal concerns surrounding population dynamics and environmental stewardship. Analyzing selected dystopian literature from an ecocritical lens ponders a deeper understanding of humanity’s challenges in forging a sustainable future and navigating the needs of sustainability and resource management.

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Keywords: dystopian literature, ecocriticism, environmental apocalypticism

In the Anthropocene Era, overpopulation presents a pressing environmental challenge. As humans take center stage as ecological actors, recognizing that previously unsustainable human-nonhuman relationships fall short of safeguarding the planet for future generations becomes clear. Dystopian literature is a powerful vehicle for contextualizing the potential environmental apocalypticism that could define our future – a world shaped by irreversible catastrophes and societies grappling desperately with adaptation. This paper delves into the recurring theme of overpopulation across three dystopian short stories: Kurt Vonnegut’s “2 B R 0 2 B,” James Graham Ballard’s “Billennium,” and Carrie Vaughn’s “Amaryllis.” In contrast to the idyllic realms of utopian literature, these narratives paint a stark picture of dread and despair in humanity’s struggle against dwindling resources. Through an ecocritical analysis, this study underscores the urgency of overpopulation as a looming threat in the near future, with its portrayal in dystopian literature serving as an unmistakable warning to safeguard against the end of a sustainable Earth.

Raziskovanje okoljskega apokaliptičizma: prenaseljenost v treh distopičnih kratkih zgodbah

Ključne besede: distopična literatura, ekokritika, okoljski apokaliptičizem

V antropocenski dobi predstavlja prenaseljenost pereč okoljski izziv. Ko ljudje zavzemajo osrednjo vlogo kot ekološki akterji, postane jasno spoznanje, da dosedanji netrajnostni odnosi med človekom in nečlovekom ne varujejo planeta za prihodnje generacije. Distopična literatura se pojavlja kot močno sredstvo za kontekstualizacijo potencialnega okoljskega apokaliptičizma, ki bi lahko opredelil našo prihodnost – svet, ki so ga oblikovale nepopravljive katastrofe, in družbe, ki se obupno spopadajo s prilagajanjem. Ta članek se ukvarja s ponavljajočo se temo prenaseljenosti v treh distopičnih kratkih zgodbah: “2 B R 0 2 B” Kurta Vonneguta, “Billennium” Jamesa Grahama Ballarda in “Amaryllis” Carrie Vaughn. V nasprotju z idiličnimi kraljestvi utopične literature te pripovedi prikazujejo ostro sliko groze in obupa v boju človeštva s pojemanjem virov. Z ekokritičsko analizo ta študija poudarja resnost prenaseljenosti kot preteče grožnje v bližnji prihodnosti, njena upodobitev v distopični literaturi pa nas nedvoumno opozarja, da ne smemo dopustiti uničenja trajnostne Zemlje.

About the author

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O avtorju

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