

The Search for Closure

in Selected Literary Representations
of the End of the World

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Abstract

Fictional representations of the end of the world suggest a failure of the idea of closure by representing a world that has failed to end. This thesis examines the issue of closure in selected texts of the end of the world in the atomic era. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980) are used as the primary examples. There are also detailed discussions of Walter M. Miller, Jr's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960), Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) and H.G. Wells' *The World Set Free* (1914). These are used primarily to contextualise the two main texts within the genre, and to develop the concept of the failure of closure. All five texts are further contextualised within the broader field of fictions of the end of the world, within the tradition of mythic representations of the end of the world, and within their contemporary historical and cultural developments.

This thesis explores closure in these novels as it relates to narrative, myth, language and landscape, as well as their nature as warnings. Narrative in such fictions is first problematised because they contain a disjunction between the end of a fiction and the end of the fictional world represented therein. In such fictions, myth is often used as a symbol of the failure of endings, as the characters find themselves in cyclical, mythic time, often looking back to a half-remembered past to find meaning in their world. This partial connection with the past implies neither a complete break nor complete rebirth, either of which would suggest a sense of closure. In a similar way to myth, language is also a symbol of a half broken connection with the past in these fictions, as the characters attempt to understand the language of the past. Furthermore, language may actually defer closure in itself by slowing reading and obfuscating meaning. The characters of these fictions also use landscape as a way of attempting to find structure and closure in their lives, although these attempts are frustrated. Finally, these texts may act as a warning, and in doing so may offer a kind of extra-textual closure. Examining these texts through the lens of closure allows new critical insight. *The Road*, in particular, has not yet been examined within the context of fictions of the end of the world.

In pursuing this investigation, this thesis also argues that endings are important in creating a sense of meaning and purpose. The denial of an ending, therefore, denies such meaning. The development of end of the world fictions has paralleled a general sense that endings have failed, and that humanity might be headed towards meaningless destruction.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Craig', written over a horizontal line.

Andrew Craig

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