

Ray Bradbury's "There will come soft rains" and HBO's *Chernobyl*: A Post-apocalyptic Reading with special reference to the predicament of Domesticated Dogs

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Abstract

This paper intends to study Ray Bradbury's much anthologised story "There will come soft rains" and HBO's popular miniseries *Chernobyl* from an eco-apocalyptic perspective, drawing attention to how the texts engage with the tangled fate of the domesticated dogs, as well as, human beings in the post-apocalyptic world. The fate of all life on the planet depends a lot on what the humans do over the next 50 years. Eco-apocalypse, an off shoot of Ecocritical studies, is concerned with the disastrous consequences of mindless human activities that is likely to bring both the human and the non-human world to the brink of devastation. By destroying the ecosystem human beings are not only causing bifurcation from and detriment to the non-human world, but also inviting their own destruction. Dogs, strays or pets, have been domesticated since millennia and this relationship has given birth to an entire subspecies that has no apparent ability to fend for themselves and depend entirely on their human companions. A dog's future is thus in jeopardy in a post-apocalyptic world if the humans turn away their face from them. In fact, unlike other animals that might survive to see the renewal and rebirth of the ecosystem, a dog's existence is trapped between epochs of domestication and the estimated eventual absence of humans. The domesticated dog in Bradbury's story comes back to an empty house unable to live by itself and dies inside a locked house and this disastrous event in Bradbury's story draws parallels with how most domesticated dogs of the residents of Pripyat were shot dead by authorities as a radiation prevention measure after the Chernobyl disaster, as showcased in HBO's Series of the same name.

Keywords: Eco-apocalypse, ecocide, species, extinction, displacement

Introduction

"The front door recognized the dog voice and opened. The dog, once huge and fleshy, but now gone to bone and covered with sores, moved in and through the house, tracking mud" (2). This is how Bradbury announces the arrival of the previously domesticated dog's arrival at the now deserted house of his masters, who have all died because of some unnamed post-apocalyptic incident. The dog

proceeds to die after tasting the smell of pancakes in the air and unable to get to them without the assistance of his human masters and the inability of the robotic systems to realize its current state of hunger and destitution. Within fifteen minutes, the “dog was gone” (Bradbury 3), its body having been taken away into the incinerator underneath the house and burned and discarded thereafter. The question then to be asked is whether it is possible to humanize our technological advancements enough for them to recognize our four-legged companions needs, or is this going to be the fate of all domesticated dogs in a post-apocalyptic situation?

Statement of Purpose

“If apocalypse is an event the script of which is already written, in what sense do human beings participate in apocalypse?” (Manley Scott 265). To talk about participating in the apocalypse with the announcement of a sense of finality of the same event is negligent of the fact that the apocalypse has been precipitated by the human race in the first place. Whether apocalypse is destined or not is a futile debate, in so far as, it does little to question and/or improve the present state of the environment. The advent of the school of Ecocriticism has asked questions about the human impact on the non-human world and tried to find and construct a narrative that lends itself towards an exploration of the climate change and the destruction of the environment and its desired balanced state. However, the crucial position at which domesticated dogs find themselves has hardly been explored and their inability to align themselves with the non-human world entirely, owing to their dependency on human beings and the unwillingness of the human race to allow any non-human species to enter into the safeguards that it has tried to and is still trying to build for its own benefits, leaves them in utero.

I intend to explore the changing paradigms of domestication that dogs have been put through, further glancing at the process and implications of domestication and try to find a space within which the future of the liminal state of our domesticated dogs can be extrapolated. Whether they have the ability to retrace their evolutionary steps and thwart the artificial selective processes that human beings have coerced on them genetically in a post-apocalyptic state, devoid of human interference in their lives, will be estimated in contrast to the otherwise more obvious end of their species in extinction, following in line with many such other non-human species before them.

The question regarding domesticated dogs is problematic because of the constant affiliation that they have maintained both with the human and the non-human world. However, in exploring Ray Bradbury’s short story where a previously domesticated dog dies without any help from his long deceased human masters and the killing of dogs in the Chernobyl exclusion zone after the nuclear disaster, some answers might start to emerge as a part of this discussion.

Domesticated dogs have formed a part of my entire life and currently, being a cohabitant of two rescued strays who have grown up in front of me, their future seems intrinsically intertwined with our own. The dire situation of the strays, and

pets in various cases, reflect the dire situation that the human society is slowly yet constantly trudging towards, however, it is without a doubt, that with our support towards their sustenance, the future might still have more to offer than an apocalyptic end, something that I have hopefully shown to have more devastating effects on our species than theirs, later in this paper.

Literature Review

“So why in—Heaven (before we are there)? /Should we give our hearts to a dog to tear?” (“The Power of the Dog”) This is what Rudyard Kipling had to say about the relationship we share with our four-legged companions in 1922. After having known high society’s obsession with breeding dogs for shows, Kipling’s poem remains as a strong voice for the compassion that we have shared. However, he talks about the various geriatric ailments of them, focusing primarily on an anthropocentric emotional turmoil of the human, denying an introspective exploration of the human interferences that resulted in most of these ailments, in the first place.

Dogs have long been a part of literature. From Toto in *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum to Lassie from Eric Knight’s *Lassie Come-Home*, authors have concentrated on the relationship between humans and their dogs over an introspection into the actual predicament of the species. In fact, most canine characters have suffered, ending up as products of their master’s affections, further extending the Victorian commodification of dogs. Dickens goes further making Jip, David Copperfield’s first wife Dora’s lap dog die simultaneously with her, almost acting as a foil to her in *David Copperfield*. Jerome K. Jerome’s Montmorency in *Three Men in a Boat* alongside Snowy in Herge’s *The Adventures of Tintin* have all played comical counterparts to their human companions, providing additional comedy. Rare exceptions can be found in James Joyce: making a well-known Irish Setter named Garryowen a part of the urban landscape of Dublin in *Ulysses*, where the dog appears in three separate chapters, interacting with humans, never losing its own characteristics. Another such instance is Virginia Woolf’s *Flush: A Biography*, where using the stream-of-consciousness narrative, she expresses the ability of a dog to explore complicated human emotions of heartbreak and dislocation. However, the fact remains that the predicament of dogs in an ever-changing landscape of climate change has not been a part of the literary space synchronously.

Where the field of Ecocriticism is concerned, although while talking about the human and non-human dynamic and oppositional duality, the problematic position that domesticated dogs acquire within that has been negligent. The extinction of various native species, owing to colonisation and related exploits has been discussed, but the parallel development of the species of dogs that accompanied the humans throughout has found little engagement. Thus, through a plethora of representation in various mediums, although dogs have become memorable characters, their predicament in the world of climate change remains

problematic, something this paper seeks to explore. Furthermore, through a deeper understanding of this, it hopes to identify how a species' future, so co-dependent on ours, could influence, if not dictate our own.

Methodologies adopted

A qualitative approach has been taken towards the construction of this paper and its argument, focusing primarily on the exploration of various fictional texts with canine characters and the field of Eco-apocalypse, that is a sub-area under Ecocriticism. It further has examined various genealogical studies of dog breeds, especially in the context of the dogs in Chernobyl.

The argument

Humans had domesticated dogs as far back as 9000 years, records of which survive as dog-sleds in Eastern Siberia and for livestock guarding and hunting purposes by the ancient Romans. It is generally believed that the ancient dogs were more diverse in genetics and thus, more enduring. It was with the advent of dog breeding in the 1800s for shows and fairs in Victorian England that "form and pedigree [took precedence] over function" (Chen et al.). The trend of dog shows and the development of an entire culture around them, being supported by little science became a socio-economic force that became a line drawn between the rich and royalty whose preference for breed prestige clashed with the upcoming middle class who intended to cash in on a developing dog breeding industry with an ever-growing customer base needing more and more dogs. Pugs grew smaller, terriers larger and bulldogs were operated on over generations to have flatter faces. The royalty set up a Kennel Club to safeguard the standards of the dog shows intending to safeguard the breeding of dogs, however, to no avail. The dog became a commodity over being a companion. It was a prized possession to be showcased rather than being a partner, both personally and professionally. "The goal was improvement of the dog show, not the dog. Breed standards, based on fashion, were locked into place to make judging easier and competition fairer. The result was dog-as-commodity." (Olmert 336)

Such standards once set were more about the people than the animals, and despite the introduction of the first Cruelty to Animals Act in 1835, most dog show enthusiasts could care less about the animal's overall health than its quality to be showed off as an item. The Victorian times have often been called the age when the Modern Dog, that we have today was created. For example, The Dalmatian was recognised as a true breed in 2011 by the American Kennel Club after 15 generations of breeding with its spots, which were a by-product of a urinary disease. Thus, to say that we as a race have been historically inclined towards the wellbeing of our four-legged companions, would be grossly incorrect. With the onset of rapid climate change, the question of their future hangs in the balance, with the capitalist commodification of dogs, especially in developing nations where breeds, such as Huskies and Malamutes are forced to live in tropical climates within restricted spaces. Although to provide a comprehensive data for the same is

difficult, considering the entire breeding industry is mostly undocumented in such nations.

Bradbury does not specify which breed of dog the past owners had that spends its last two hours in the empty house, but considering that the owners had lived in a house where “not even a bird must touch the house” (2), it would not be a stretch to estimate that the dog was of pedigree and thus, had the disability that comes along with being a purebred. This assertion then only clears up the path on which society is progressing for the author, an automated house built to hold off nature and wilderness and thus, unable to recognise the pet when it comes back after having been in the wild for some time. This tussle between wilderness and domestication is where the fate of the domesticated dog lies in a world that is rapidly changing with the onset of aggressive climate change. Will the dog be able to retrace the steps it has been made to take over the last ~16,000 years and return to the wild? Or will the sub-species of *Canis lupus familiaris* die out slowly without the presence of human beings to depend on?

The nuclear disaster of Chernobyl in 1986 could have provided us with a comprehensive answer for the same, if it was not for the extermination efforts, choosing to kill off all animals that had been left behind in the affected town of Pripjat. Although originally promised reunion, the pets who had left behind with some extra food and water during the hasty evacuation were meant to be killed by a group of ‘liquidators’ appointed by the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs. This exact plan of action has been Portrayed in HBO’s original series *Chernobyl*. The fourth episode of the series showcases how two soldiers sent to kill the pet dogs of the evacuated population, found most of the dogs, either trapped behind closed doors, making for easy targets or tied with leashes that facilitated the ‘clean up’. However, although, not clearly evidenced within the episode entitled “The Happiness of All Mankind”, records and further forays into the exclusion by SPCA International and Clean Futures Fund have found a thriving feral dog population within the restricted area that have been traced back to the pets that had escaped during the extermination process and have managed to breed and multiply over the last 37 odd years. Although, it is difficult to ascertain their heritage to the pet of Pripjat, it is not difficult to infer the same, considering most of these dogs that live in Chernobyl now, have been traced back to German Shephard Dog and Eastern European feral breeds. Is there a chance for the retracing the gene pool that we have historically restricted our dogs to over the last ~150 years then? Do they still have the ability to access their wild instincts and survive by themselves? Although Bradbury does not provide a very bright image, where the displaced dog dies, the Chernobyl dogs might provide us with a better prospect. It is difficult though to say the Chernobyl dogs survived on their own entirely, having been sustained by food provided by clean-up crews over the years, until better prospects arrived via vaccination, sterilization and adoption attempts, ending with the removal of 15 puppies in 2018 to be adopted in the United States. What would have been their

fate, if they did not get the clean-up crew to depend upon? Will the population have been exterminated altogether?

It is important to talk about the infamous ‘Silver Fox Domestication Experiment’ which attempted to domesticate a wild species of silver fox. The man behind the project, Dmitri Belyaev and his mentee, Lyudmila Trut, started this effort as early as 1959, when they started selectively breeding an endemic population of silver fox choosing to breed the tamest of the animals every generation to see how and if they start becoming more prosocial-toward-human in nature. The origin of domestication is considered as an attempt at finding animals that were behaviourally most aligned to humans and through an ensuing symbiotic relation that developed, them getting progressively more domestic. The silver fox experiment intended to create similar situation for a population of silver foxes and hopefully follow their progress towards a more domesticated nature. After breeding them for generations, however, apart from behavioural changes, physiological changes started manifesting themselves. The first fox puppy with drooping ears, like a dog was born in 1969, within the first ten years of conducting the experiment. In fact, further changes like the shortening of the muzzles, the growth of mottled fur, longer breeding seasons were all noticed, earlier than was expected. In fact, the foxes were mostly domesticated within some generations. Their movement away from wild counterparts was notable and transposing on dogs, it has been estimated that dogs are not just domesticated at this point, but they have gone through permanent genetic changes that might render it impossible for them survive without their current state of affairs, being cared for by humans, directly as pets, or indirectly, as strays.

If we consider, that nature can be a playfield for a natural duplication of Belyaev’s experiment, the Chernobyl dogs after escaping to the wild might have been subject to a reversal of domestication. Unlike, Belyaev who chose the tamest of the foxes in every generation that he bred, the wilderness around Chernobyl and the lack of human company for food and shelter, might have forced the dog population to dwindle down into only the strongest of the individuals. In fact, in the mentioned episode of *Chernobyl*, it is somewhat clarified that the larger dogs, the breeds originated in hunting and livestock upkeep were the most difficult to kill because of their inclination towards more aggressive self-protection and physically larger sizes. Thus, the highest number of dogs that managed to escape extermination by the ‘liquidators’ were the more powerful, larger breeds, and further on, would have managed to hunt down the smaller ones that escaped as well. Thus, standing on the polar opposite of Belyaev’s experiment, the escaped dogs of Chernobyl were naturally selected over generations to be the wildest of the lot. This process continued for every generation that was born thereafter and thus, the once domesticated dog population managed to thrive in the absence of human beings. So, in a post-apocalyptic scenario, is there a chance of dogs going through natural selection and evolving and devolving at the same time back into an altered version of their original ancestry? Animals that have the ability to hunt and fend

for themselves. However, the question that needs to be asked then is how did this apparently wild population of dogs remake their connection with their human counterparts, when the clean-up crews started frequenting the exclusion zone? How can dogs de-wild themselves with the resurgence of human contact? Or is it possible for them to lead a double existence, existing in between wilderness and domestication at will and/or the availability of resources?

Considering that despite various studies, nothing has yet surfaced about the clear ancestry of the Chernobyl dogs, some claiming that they are descended from the pets left behind, others citing the diverse gene pool within them as a detriment to the same. What is clear, however, is that through generations of cross-breeding, whether between the pets left behind and other feral dogs in and around the area and so on, the exponential resurgence of the canine population in the isolated zone of the Chernobyl power plant proves beyond doubt that our canine companions have the ability to thrive even in the lack of their human masters or caregivers. What would have been the situation in the absence of the clean-up workers and other active human populations around the exclusion zone remains a conjecture. Undoubtedly, the lack of human beings has, within the isolated populated of the dogs in Chernobyl who were exposed to deadly amounts of radiation, shown that the absence of humans has proved to be more beneficial to the dogs, bringing them back to the process of natural selection, where the survival of the strongest gene pool in every generation facilitates a stronger species. In fact, we can further estimate that the Victorian dog show culture's artificial selection of dogs and breeding over multiple generations requires no human intervention to reverse. The course of evolution will automatically take over and ensure the further existence of them. Why then, does Bradbury's story show us the image of a helpless dog covered in dirt and diseased die without access to its human masters?

The automated house in Bradbury's story "There will Come Soft Rains" goes up in flames after a tree falls on top of it and a fire breaks out engulfing the entire house. As the automated responses of the house, trying to restrict the fire slowly fail one by one, the image becomes one of reclamation. Nature reclaims what is essentially her and breaks through the created boundaries that withheld it hitherto. Bradbury is unwilling still to present to us a very optimistic vision, although the dog originally escapes the nuclear blast, but it dies from the radiation exposure when we see it foaming at the mouth and then collapsing to its death after a frenzy, although the tree's falling on the house, completely destroys it, a sole wall manages to keep standing which even announces the regular update of date and time when the following morning arrives. So, going by the story, have we managed to and further will manage to create a world that is even impenetrable to nature? Considering the various projects around the globe of building self-sustaining cities through the desert or building entire cities on created artificial islands on the sea, namely, The Line in Saudi Arabia and The Palm Islands and The World Islands in the United Arab Emirates.

In the discussion of climate change, the question of the human race exploiting nature and its resources has been of central importance throughout. However, when we are now on the verge of creating nature itself artificially, like the Supertree Grove in Singapore, should we be concerned also about the annihilation of Nature itself? With the advent of our abilities to recreate nature, should we now be concerned about the end of nature itself, rather than concentrating just on its exploitation. In context of Bradbury's story then, it becomes clear why the author chooses to make our technological advancements stand tall over nature. Why the single wall stands, despite nature's attempt at regaining its own. He does not foresee a time when nature recuperates and establishes the ecological balance all over again, he sees a future that is a chaotic assemblage of what is human made and its disastrous outcome.

The discussion around ideas like 'wrong kind of strength' and 'great derangement' among others have been the talk of Anthropocene studies for a while now. However, in this context, talking about the situation of domesticated dogs and their future in a post-apocalyptic world as represented in Bradbury's short story and HBO's miniseries, it is important to consider not only the human impact on the environment, but the attempts at the creation of a new environment altogether, that bypasses our duties towards restoration of ecological balance and intends to create an entire new system that suits our needs as a priority, rather than trying to balance the order out. When the dog dies in Bradbury's story, who is a victim of? A nuclear blast, precipitated by human warfare or his inability to survive without his human companions? When the dogs left behind at Prip'yat were planned to be killed off rather than being treated for radiation exposure, whose fault was it that they turned feral?

"You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed" (80)

The fox says this to the little prince in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's classic children's tale *Little Prince*, in reminding the young prince of his responsibilities. Why are we not responsible for our dogs for the same reason today then? It was the ancient human that had managed to domesticate dogs for their own benefits of safeguarding against other wild animals and that relation has managed to flourish into what it is today, having gone through various periods, punctuated by the Victorian Era boom of creating breeds for shows and then, the era of capitalist commodification that took the Victorian obsession with pedigree and breed into toxic maximums and finally, arriving at the epoch of climate change, where their future, going by presentation within literature and media, as showcased already, being bleak, if not improbable altogether. With the advent of technology that enables us to create an entirely new natural system for ourselves, in an attempt to dictate the ecology, are we only going towards an age where the dogs will also face a similar predicament being replaced by something that is more mechanized and robotic, completely denying our existing four-legged cohabitants a chance at a symbiotic existence. Is our future filled with robotic dogs once all the dogs that we

see round us today are dead like the story of Bradbury? Or have been killed off as a by-product of some man-made disaster like Chernobyl?

Bradbury shows no way forward, and neither would Chernobyl have, if it wasn't for its dogs. The rapid resurgence of their population, despite all odds, be it, extermination attempts, sudden acclimatization with wilderness, lack of proper caregivers and various mutations and genetic issues, shows us that in a world, where human beings might fail to survive, our canine comrades can manage to breed and despite all odds thrown at them, can become a healthy population again within a span of ~30 years. Now, the question that needs to be asked is what do we, as the most dominant and advanced species currently on this planet, torn apart by climate change and its ensuing effects, do that can ensure a better future not only for ourselves, but also for then ones we tamed and thus, should be responsible for?

Many evidences point towards a bleak future for us as a race, who face a looming threat of extinction, either because of our own disastrous treatment of the environment or because of the repercussions of where we have already landed nature presently. Will our dogs survive that? It is difficult to say for certain if they will, but it can be said with almost certainty that we would not. Is it then time to revisit the symbiosis that we had handcrafted with them? The dogs that protected us were the ones fed by us and down the line cared for by us too. It is pertinent to remember that every species has an individual role to play within our ecosystems and it would be a shame, if the only animals around, that have been a bridge between our world of artificial selection and signification and the natural world of organic development and structure perishes on our watch. Can we stop climate change by taking care of our canine companions? Probably not, but by giving them a chance at survival, we can definitely be one step closer. The endemic empathy of humanity can cater more easily to a different species that has been in constant exchanges with us since thousands of years, than other wild animals which we have instinctually feared and avoided in our natural course of lives forever. The domestication of dogs remains one of the biggest instances of a human-nature ecological assemblage, that has transformed both beneficiaries. We have gone astray with our treatment of them, but it is not impossible, to retrace our steps so that they do not have to retrace theirs. And to start retracing there could very well become the start of a retracing that could end up with us being more in harmony with nature, environment and the larger idea of climate.

Conclusion

The important thing to remember here is that in our absence, nature has thrived, but in its absence, will we be able to do the same? Although our present attempts at creating nature might be seen as a solution to this apparent implosive duality, it would be naive to ascertain that that is the way forward and a complete redesigning of nature catering to our requirements will find similar devastating results as reflected within the Victorian dog breeding practices. Instead, let's talk about

harmony, let's invest in conserving rather than converting nature, let's remember why we domesticated dogs, it was for our protection, not for theirs. And in today's milieu, that truth does not change. Protecting a dog will not only give it a better chance at survival, but it will in fact, give us a better chance at it too.

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