

# Interpretation, Narrative and Study of “Disaster” Scenarios in Western Literature

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Disaster runs through the whole process of human development. As a common topic faced by mankind anywhere and anytime, disaster has become the object of consideration and writing by writers in every country. This paper first identifies the etymological meaning of “disaster” in Western language and culture, and then examines the main representations of Western “disaster” literature in terms of literary genre, developing trajectory and thematic characteristics. Finally, the paper summarizes the researches of Western “disaster” literature, and provide references for worldwide study of “disaster” literature.

*Keywords:* disaster, “disaster” literature, interpretation, narrative, study

## Introduction

The earliest study of “disaster” can probably be traced to Samuel Henry Prince’s research of the Halifax oil tanker explosion in 1920 (XIA, 2011, pp. 73-81). In 1963, American sociologists Quarantelli E.L., Russell Dynes, and J. Eugene Haas founded the world’s first Disaster Research Center at the Ohio State University. Over the past century, the international study of “disaster” has broadened out into more than 30 disciplines, including sociology, geography, politics, economics, ecology, and environmentology.

As a literary genre, “disaster” literature has become an important part of Western literature. When studying the theme of “disaster” in literature, Western scholars usually first classify the types of disasters, then explain the features and effects of these “disasters”, and finally look into its ideological connotation and practical significance in depth. This paper focuses on the etymology and interpretation of “disaster” as well as the narrative and study of “disaster” in Western literature, in order to provide readers with a genealogical scenario of “disaster” literature in the above three aspects.

## I. Interpretation of “Disaster”

The English word, “disaster”, has undergone a long evolution from Greek, Latin, Italian, and French languages. It originated from the ancient Greek word “astron” for “planet or star”. The ancient Greeks were fascinated by astronomy and the cosmos, and considered the unfavorable or uncontrollable alignment of planets a particular kind of disaster. They also believed in the influence of celestial bodies on terrestrial life, so they attributed the disasters that occurred on Earth to celestial anomalies (Gusano, 2020). In the 16th century, when

the ancient Greek language was introduced into Italy via Latin, the root "astro", which evolved from "astron", and the pejorative prefix "dis", made up the word "disastro", literally meaning "ill-starred", also means "unlucky" or "having or destined to a hapless fate". Later, the word came into French language in the 1660s and eventually evolved from the French "d'ésastre" to the English word "disaster" in the 1690s (Harper, 2022). Since then, the meaning of "disaster" in English has been used to date and has become the definition in most English dictionaries, which is "anything that befalls of ruinous or distressing nature; any unfortunate event", especially a sudden or great misfortune. *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines "disaster" as "a very bad accident such as an earthquake or a plane crash, especially one in which a lot of people are killed"<sup>1</sup>. This definition includes both natural and man-made events.

Although "disaster" is frequently used, Western scholars also use its close synonyms, such as calamity, catastrophe, apocalypse, and act of God. By consulting synonym dictionaries, we find that "calamity" is the most frequently occurring synonym of "disaster". However, the definition of "calamity" is "a disastrous event marked by great loss and lasting distress and suffering", "Distress" refers to external and temporary pressure, while "suffering" indicates conscious enduring pain<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, "calamity" extends its meaning to mental anguish caused by disasters. The word "catastrophe" was also borrowed from the ancient Greek, referring to the denouement of a drama, especially the subversive end of a tragedy. Until the mid-18th century, it was gradually used to indicate catastrophic events "ranging from extreme misfortune to utter overthrow or ruin"<sup>3</sup>. Compared with "disaster", "catastrophe" usually refers to disasters of greater scale and scope. The word "apocalypse" is derived from the ancient Greek word "apokalyptein", which means "revelation" (Harper, 2022). In the Latin Bibles, "the Apocalypse" is the name of the last chapter of the New Testament. It was introduced into Middle English in the late 14th century and generally referred to the End of the world in Christian doctrine until the 20th century, when it was extended to denote "an event involving destruction or damage on a catastrophic scale". Another synonym appears in the Bible is "act of God". Christians believed that God arranges disasters to express His displeasure with mankind, to punish them and lead them to repentance (Amos 4:6-13). Hence the term "act of God" means "an event that is beyond human control."<sup>4</sup> "Holocaust" in particular means the destruction caused by fire or nuclear war, mainly including man-made disasters. In historiography, "the Holocaust" also refers specifically to the Nazi massacre of the Jews during World War II.

In addition to dictionary definitions, Western scholars have applied their own disciplinary methods to the study of "disaster" in their own research fields. According to a research in 2015, there were 197 definitions of "disaster" at the time (Mayner, 2015, p. 23). In the 20th century, Western academics saw the importance of disaster research through the impact of war on the world and established several disaster research centers. When the war ended, the focus of research shifted to disasters in nature, and scholars in geology and environmentology focused mainly on natural factors of disasters (Chmutina & Meding, 2019, pp. 283-292). In the 1990s, American political ecologist Piers Blaikie (1942-) and others argued that disasters are caused not only by natural events but also the product of social, political, and economic environments, and thus they

<sup>1</sup> Collins English Dictionary. Harper Collins Publishers, [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english). Accessed 12 June. 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary). Accessed 28 May. 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary). Accessed 28 May. 2022.

<sup>4</sup> English-Chinese Chinese-English Dictionary of Disaster Science [Z]. Beijing Science and Technology Press.1992

proposed that disasters consist of three interrelated factors: hazards, vulnerability, and risk (Blaikie, et al., 1994, pp. 1-496). Kenneth Hewitt (1937-), an American cultural geographer, in his treatise *Interpretations of calamity: from the viewpoint of human ecology* (1983), states that “natural forces are not dangerous in themselves, but become so when associated with human activities and human values” (Hewitt, 1983, p. 304). The idea that natural disasters are identified as disastrous because of their impact on human societies was later shared by most scholars. The American medical scholar Joseph Zibulewsky (1959-), based on his study of the definition of “disaster” by the American College of Emergency Physicians and the World Health Organization, suggested that whether natural or man-made, “disasters are defined by what they do to people” (Zibulewsky, 2001, p. 144). German sociologist Wolf R. Dombrowsky (1948-) argued, “There is no distinction between a disaster and (‘its’) effects” (Dombrowsky, 1995, p. 244). That is to say, “disaster” includes not only the event itself, but also the following impact it has on human society.

To summarize, we find that “disaster” in Western discourse basically contains three layers of meaning, namely, “the disaster event itself”, “the immediate effects of the disaster”, and “the long-term effects left by the disaster”. We can also divide disaster events into three phases: pre-disaster, disaster, and post-disaster. In everyday life, it is difficult to prevent disaster from occurring due to its unexpected nature. Immediately after the disaster, there will be relief and reconstruction efforts until the whole thing seems to be over. Nevertheless, the physical and mental wounds left by disaster cannot be healed promptly, and the shadow of disaster lurks beneath the seemingly calm surface, which may trigger painful memories of disaster under certain circumstance and cause secondary or even multiple injuries to people’s bodies or minds. The third level of meaning is often given less attention, yet it is precisely this period—to overcome disaster memories and trauma—that has become the focus of writers and Western “disaster” literature. In a word, “disaster” literature is more concerned with the invisible content behind the visible “disaster”.

## II. The “Disaster Narrative” in Western Literature

The “disaster narrative” in Western literature has a long history, ranging from epic, ritual music and dance to mythology, memoirs, diaries and biographies, and then to novels, poems, essays, dramas, film and television scripts and other literary forms (BAI, 2019, pp. 8-15). It can be said that almost all literary forms deal with the subject and theme of “disaster”.

From the 9th to the 8th century B.C., the ancient Greek poet Homer wrote the *Homeric Hymns*, which recounted the disasters brought by the Trojan War and the adventures of Odysseus on his way home. This was probably the first work in Western literature to write about “disaster”. In the Middle Ages, literature was used for religious purpose, as *the Bible* depicted various natural disasters such as the Great Flood, famine, pestilence, and drought. In Christian theology, millenarians believed that the millennium is the penultimate generation of humanity, and therefore “the apocalyptic literature” focused on the supernatural, prophetic and catastrophic events that will occur at the End of the world (Rowland, 2009, pp. 1-20). In the 14th century, Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* (1350-1353) was set against the backdrop of the Black Death, and told a hundred stories about ten young men and women who fled to the countryside to escape the plague. The 18th-century English writer Daniel Defoe’s *The Chronicle of the Plague* (1722) and the 20th-century French novelist Albert Camus’s *La Peste* (1947) are also masterpieces that recounted serious epidemics. In the

Romantic 19th century, the English poet Samuel Coleridge in his narrative poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) depicted the character's sea voyage through storms, ice storms and fogs (XIE & CHEN, 2010, pp. 100-103), and the American writer Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) used a Gothic style to reveal the human fear of plague, disaster and death. In 1918, the Spanish Flu pandemic swept across the European continent and eventually became one of the reasons for the early end of WWI. A century later, British author Laura Spenny's *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World* (2021) told the story of Spanish flu and its enormous impact on humanity.

Since the 20th century, there have been five types of "disaster" literature. The first of them is "the war literature", as the wars brought tragic disasters to mankind in that century. Writers from all over the world devoted themselves to narrating the disastrous damage caused by war in various aspects such as politics, economy and ecology. For example, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) reflected the lifelong physical and psychological trauma left by WWI. In 1945, the first atomic bomb in human history exploded, making people from all countries to be highly concerned about the nuclear disaster. American author Pat Frank's (1908-1964) *Alas, Babylon* (1959) told the story of a group of people who survived in a small town that escaped a nuclear bomb attack.

After the end of WWII, some writers focused on the Jews and their reflections on the war disaster and national trauma, forming a second genre of "disaster" literature—"the holocaust literature". This genre is represented by Australian novelist Thomas Keneally's (1935-) *Schindler's Ark* (1982), which was later adapted into the film *Schindler's List* (1993). American author Saul Bellow's novelette *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989) and Irish novelist John Boyne's (1971-) *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2006) both reflected directly or indirectly on the persecution and trauma suffered by Jews during and after WWII.

In the second half of the 20th century, with the development of psychology and psychoanalysis, the term "trauma" came into view. It originally meant physical damage to the human body, but later referred more to the mental damage. In the 1990s, the scope and object of trauma studies were expanded, and more researchers turned their views to the third type of "disaster" literature—"trauma literature". Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Tony Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) are considered classic works of "trauma literature". The term "post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)" emerged when the Vietnam War caused tremendous and lasting trauma to the people of both nations. *The Things They Carried* (1990) is one of American writer Tim O'Brien's works which reflected PTSD. The post-war era saw the emergence of "dystopian literature" influenced by the Cold War and the nuclear threat. Many works, including British author George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1953), had a huge impact on trauma literature by focusing on the sense of trauma in a dystopian context (Ronald, 1995, p. 4).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the September 11 attacks had a huge impact on the United States and the American people. American author Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* (2007) reflects the serious impact on the daily lives of ordinary Americans in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Later, documentary literature like American author Lawrence Wright's (1947-) 2007 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Looming Tower* traces the construction of al-Qaeda and the events of September 11 in detail.

At the same time, a fourth genre of "disaster" literature emerged in Western literature—"the post-apocalyptic fiction". As the name implies, the post-apocalyptic era is the time after the Prophecy of the

End described in *the Bible*'s "Apocalypse". American novelist Cormack McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) depicted the survival of a father and son ten years after a nuclear disaster. Thanks to the advancement of science and technology, more and more "disaster" literature is presented to readers in the form of films. Apart from the familiar "12 Monkeys" (1995), "The Day After Tomorrow" (2004), "2012" (2009) and other "disaster" films, "The Book of Eli" (2010) took the post-apocalyptic world as the background, portraying the main character as Jesus, who experienced rebirth and saved the world. The "Book" is not only a stand-in for the Bible, but could be any symbol that will guide humanity and human's triumph over disasters.

In addition, science fiction is also an important carrier for "disaster" narrative. Angela Becerra Vidergar (1980-) from Stanford University, refers to these fictions collectively as "fiction of destruction"—the fifth genre of "disaster" literature (Vidergar, 2013, pp. 1-202). American author Walter M. Miller Jr. (1923-1996) wrote the post-apocalyptic science fiction *A Canticle for Leibowitz* in 1960, telling the destruction and rebirth of human civilization. Similar works include American author James Powlik's *Sea Change* (2001) and British author John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). Science fiction writers often imagine one or more worlds where disaster strikes, envisioning the destroyed world, reflecting people's worries about the insecurity and uncertainty of the real world, while expressing their hopes for the future. These works bring "disaster" literature to a further stage—while characterizing "disaster" and its effects, they also consider how to save human beings out of "disaster".

In conclusion, Western "disaster" literature has the following two characteristics: First, the realistic narrative of the "already" disaster. It emphasizes the relationship between disasters and human beings, and focuses on the short-term or long-term, explicit or implicit effects of catastrophic events on human society. Secondly, the imaginative writing of "unprecedented" disasters, which expresses the writers' deep concern and thought about the possible future disasters and good wish to find a solution.

### III. Western "Disaster" Literature Studies

After the experience, imagination and creation of "disaster" literature, studying "disaster" literature has become the "collective unconscious" of readers. As early as B.C., the ancient Greek Alexandrian school started the study of *Homeric Hymns*. The depiction of the Trojan War in the *Homeric Hymns* was brutal, but truly reflected the people's understanding of war in that era (ZHANG, 2021, pp. 192-198+226). Thousands of years later, "disaster" narrative still attracts Western scholars' attention. Western "disaster" literature studies can be roughly divided into the five types as the same as the classification of "disaster" literature.

The first type is the study of the war literature. As a form of disaster, war has always been an important theme in Western literature, whether it is documentary literature recording war, or anti-war literature emerging after the war, carrying and embodying the catastrophic consequences of war on human civilization and spirit. According to Hu Yamin, from the post-WWII period to the 1990s, the study of war literature mainly focused on specific work or work of a particular country. After the 21st century, many monographs were published to conduct comprehensive studies on war literature, such as *The Cambridge Companion to World War I Literature* (2005) and *The Cambridge Companion to World War II Literature* (2009) (HU, 2021). The study of war literature not only provides a reference for understanding the history of war, social changes, and the views

and values of war of different peoples in different periods, but more importantly, urges people to think about how to avoid war disasters and seek peaceful development.

Moreover, "holocaust literature" has been receiving much attention. Witnesses, survivors, and their descendants have devoted themselves to creating literature about holocausts. The holocaust was not only a disaster for a particular people, but also a tragedy for humanity. *Holocaust Literature* (2013), edited by American scholar Alan Rosen, contains 16 essays that provide a review of the history of holocaust literature in various regions of wartime and postwar Europe (Rosen, 2013, pp. 1-324). In recent years, scholars from other countries have also focused on their own holocaust literature by studying available memoirs, novels, and documentary materials. Scholars have adopted different theoretical perspectives to explore the significance and impact of this type of "disaster" literature, and are still trying to rouse the attention of modern society to such human tragedy as holocaust, to prevent similar disasters from occurring in the future.

In the 1990s, "trauma literature" study was emerged from the combination of "Trauma Theory" in psychology and postwar literature. Cathy Caruth's (1955-) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) provided the most authoritative definition of trauma. Jeffrey Alexander's (1947-) "Trauma Theory" opened the way for scholars to understand the individual and collective trauma behind literary works. When studying "trauma literature", researchers are able to find out the PTSD caused by disasters, and explore the sources and healing methods of individual, group, and even generational trauma. Till the 21st century, the works of third-generation Jewish writers became the most visible manifestation of the inter-generational trauma. Victoria Aarons, an expert of the Holocaust, discussed classic topics such as the transmission and reconstruction of disaster memory and the inter-generational perpetuation of trauma in third-generation holocaust literature in her book, *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory* (Aarons, 2017, pp. 1-280).

The September 11 attacks at the beginning of the 21st century were seen by some religious people as "the end of the world". Therefore, "disaster" narrative in post-9/11 literature, along with "post-apocalyptic literature", have received increasing attention from scholars. The American scholar Elizabeth Hageman (1991-) studied four works of "post-apocalyptic literature" to reveal the influence of 9/11 on American public sentiment and even on the creation of literature (Hageman, 2015, pp. 1-57). Korean scholar Moon Hyong-jun studied contemporary "apocalyptic" and "post-apocalyptic" narratives, noting that the common denominator of apocalyptic disasters is violence. As an important narrative device, natural or man-made violence is inflicted on ordinary life, destroying human civilization, and natural environment, thus creating a destroyed world that reflects a series of narratives such as the reconstruction of civilization and the formation of society in the context of such a fictional apocalypse. This can be considered as the common nature of "post-apocalyptic literature" (Moon, 2014, pp. 1-276).

The last type of "disaster" literature, the "fiction of destruction," presents a "dystopian" feature. Raffaella Baccolini, an Italian scholar, examined the "dystopian turn" of Western science fiction in the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that these novels, with their critical and political characteristics, laid the groundwork for guiding readers and the society toward a utopian change (Baccolini, 2004, pp. 518-521). Besides, other literary studies have linked "disaster" literature to the destruction of the Holy Land of Jerusalem, such as Columbia University's Gil Hochberg, who focused on the destruction of the Jewish state in Hebrew literature and critically discusses the social aspects of this genre (Hochberg, 2020, pp. 19-31).

Except for these five genres, Western “disaster” literature is rich in other literary form and content. But few scholars have studied and sorted them out as a large and complete branch of literature at the level of genealogical research. The study of “disaster” involved more than 30 disciplines, which encourages the interdisciplinary study of “disaster” literature. Firstly, “disaster” literature can be studied in terms of language itself. German scholar, Gabriele Dürbeck has highlighted the semantic and narrative functions of “disaster” literature from a semantic perspective (Dürbeck, 2012, pp. 1-9). Angela Stock and Cornelia Stott in their book brought together 13 essays by literary critics, historians, sociologists, and philosophers from several countries, whose research supported the constructivist view of language. It suggested that disaster literature does not simply reflect disaster events, but shapes or reconstructs them through the ideology embedded in language, thus conveying messages of social, cultural and political interests (Stock, 2007, pp. 1-226). Secondly, “disaster” literature study has become a new research paradigm by combining it with humanities such as psychology and ethics. Nie Zhenzhao, the founder of literary ethics criticism, claimed that adopting an ethical perspective to interpret disaster narratives in literature can help us find moral inspiration (LI, 2022, pp. 197-201). With the progress of science and technology, “disaster” literature has become a new subject in the study of natural sciences such as geography, ecology, and environmentology. The philosopher Michael Dieter Lutz focused on ecological disasters in contemporary Western literature, and analyzed the environmental disasters and the ecological views and ideologies reflected in several classic literary and film works (Lutz, 2001, pp. 1-245). In recent years, ecological literature study has also led to an upsurge in the study of the “Anthropocene” and “climate fiction”. In a word, the interdisciplinary study of “disaster” literature seems to have a very broad developing space.

### Conclusion

In the long history of mankind, “disaster” and “disaster” literature studies will coexist in the past, at present and in the future. This paper provides an overview of “disaster” in Western literature and illustrates the profound significance of “disaster” literature in the history of human literature. Through the works and studies of “disaster” literature, we should not only focus on “disaster” itself, but also on the far-reaching effects of “disaster” on humanity, and reflect on the important position of “disaster” in the history of human development. “Disaster” literature study reflects profound humanistic concern, and is of great theoretical value and practical significance in promoting the concept of “a community with a shared future of mankind”.

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