

Isolation in the Ruins: Post-Apocalyptic Loneliness in Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars**

XIN Hui-min

Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing, China

CAO Wen-qing

Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars* is a fascinating meditation of post-apocalyptic loneliness. Set in a dismal world devastated by a devastating virus, the story centers on the protagonist Hig's experience and response as he navigates a terrain devoid of human connection and meaning. This paper investigates the complexities of loneliness, focusing on Hig's response to the loss of his wife and dog. Furthermore, it delves into the transformational power of companionship, including Hig's link with his dog Jasper and his ultimate connection with Cima and her father. The fragmented narrative style of the novel mirrors Hig's internal struggle, offering a raw and intimate portrayal of his journey towards reconnection and hope. Through the novel, Heller offers his profound thinking on the significance of connection in overcoming even post-apocalyptic loneliness.

Keywords: Peter Heller, *The Dog Stars*, post-apocalypse, loneliness

Introduction

Peter Heller's debut novel *The Dog Stars* (2012) depicts the survival story of Hig, who has lived alone in a deserted airport with his aging dog Jasper and only neighbor Bangle for nine years in the post-apocalyptic American after the fatal superflu and contagious blood disease. During the past years, they face threats from few attacks of invaders, scarce resources, and loneliness. Hig reminisces about past happy times, including his marriage and love for nature. While patrolling and flying to protect himself from the remaining "Not Nice" intruders while maintaining hope for life, his loneliness intensifies, leading him to question his existence. Thus, the profound sense of loneliness that Hig experiences seeps through the pages of the novel, becoming not just a recurring motif but the very core and central theme that dominates the narrative. This pervasive feeling of isolation serves to underscore and vividly illustrate Heller's vision of a post-apocalyptic world. In this desolate landscape, Hig's emotional state mirrors the emptiness and desolation that surround him, highlighting the human cost of such a catastrophic event. Through Hig's eyes, we see the remnants of a society that has crumbled, and the

* **Acknowledgements:** Special thanks to the committee of Jiangsu Social Science and NUAA. This paper is sponsored by the Jiangsu Social Science Fund under the grant title "A Study of Post-apocalyptic Writing in Contemporary American Novels" (20WWB005). It is also supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, No. XAB22018.

XIN Hui-min (Corresponding author), Ph.D., Associate Professor of English literature, College of Foreign Languages, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics.

CAO Wen-qing, M.A., Student Affairs Office, Nanjing Normal University.

deep, aching solitude that comes with the loss of community, connection, and the familiar structures of everyday life after the pandemic. This novel focuses on loneliness not only drives the plot forward but also invites readers to reflect on the inherent need for human connection and the potential despair that could arise in a world stripped of its former vibrancy and life.

For Alberti, loneliness is “an emotion ‘cluster’, a blend of different emotions that might range from anger, resentment, and sorrow to jealousy, shame, and self-pity” (Alberti, 2019, p. 6). Since the 18th century, loneliness has often been accompanied by negative emotions such as sadness, emptiness, and despair. Some historians believe that loneliness is a product of the 19th century, which acts as “a reaction to the alienation attendant upon industrialism, urbanism, and intensifying mobility and distancing” (Popp, 2023, p. 75). It can be caused by many different circumstances, including social isolation, the loss of loved ones, or the absence of meaningful interactions. Loneliness may exert severe repercussions on an individual’s mental health and overall well-being. However, it can also act as a catalyst for personal development and introspection.

In *The Dog Stars*, Hig’s profound sense of solitude permeates the entire narrative. Could there be a more poignant manifestation of loneliness in the post-apocalyptic situation than the one that has been depicted for centuries? In contrast to the conventional perspective on loneliness, the post-apocalyptic variant is characterized by a survival-oriented and community-centric form of solitude, which is associated with a profound sense of isolation and a diminished likelihood of reintegration. This paper examines the theme of post-apocalyptic loneliness in *The Dog Stars*, aiming to uncover its essence and the motivations behind Heller’s portrayal of such isolation.

Isolation in the Apocalypse: Hig’s Descent into Loneliness

Loneliness originates with isolation, which occurs when people are physically or emotionally separated from others. This distance reveals itself not only in the absence of companionship, but also in a lack of meaningful connections, communication, and shared experiences. Isolation can occur from a variety of causes, including society collapse, personal choice, or external factors such as disease or geographical distance. In today’s hyper-connected society, individuals may experience a heightened sense of loneliness despite being tightly connected to others, a phenomena Sherry Turkle eloquently defines as “alone together” in her book of the same title. Modern loneliness consists of both passive influence and intentional choice.

In the context of a post-apocalyptic scenario, isolation is heightened by the harsh realities of a fractured world. In the novel, civilization has been devastated by a deadly flu and a blood disease, leaving only a handful of survivors. Nine years following the pandemic, Hig and Bingley have established their stronghold at a derelict airport in Erie, Colorado, serving as a bastion against the outside world. Due to the grumpy nature of Bingley, the dog Jasper becomes Hig’s sole companion throughout these years. Hig grapples not just with the physical desolation surrounding him, but also with a huge internal void created by the loss of loved ones and community, especially when he patrols over the desolate world by his 1956 Cessna 182 plane named “Beast” every day. As he gazes upon the sky, he becomes aware that “[t]he tiger left, the elephant, the apes, the baboon, the cheetah. The titmouse, the frigate bird, the pelican (gray), the whale (gray), the collared dove. Sad but” (Heller, 2013a, p. 1). The disappearance of humanity and the extinction of animals deeply underscore the profound and ultimate loneliness that Hig, one of the few remaining survivors, is experiencing. In a world stripped of familiar

connections and companionship, Hig's isolation becomes a stark reality, highlighting the emotional weight of his solitude as he grapples with the remnants of a once-thriving existence.

Moreover, the emotional landscape in the aftermath of a widespread pandemic is complex and multifaceted, particularly regarding fear and loneliness. Since the post-apocalyptic loneliness is survival-driven, the emotion is more deeply intertwined with fear. This is because fear is often heightened due to the immediate threat to health and safety. Hig's fear can manifest as hyper-vigilance about his personal safety, further isolating himself as he takes precautions to avoid being killed by the intruders. So Hig patrols constantly to find the invaders from a vantage point and protect the territory of their base. And the coaction between fear and loneliness can exacerbate mental health issues. For example, the fear of illness or death may cause individuals to become increasingly isolated, which subsequently intensifies their sense of loneliness. This emotional strain can create a vicious cycle where loneliness breeds anxiety, and in turn, anxiety heightens loneliness, perpetuating the cycle.

For many people, the isolation not only heightens feelings of anxiety but also creates a void where social connections once flourished. This dual burden of facing a world changed by loss and the absence of community can lead to a profound sense of despair. The longing for companionship, for shared experiences, and for a sense of normalcy stimulates the deep human need for connection, making the aftermath of such crises even more challenging to navigate. In the novel, Hig constantly immerses into the sense of fundamental existential loneliness, a profound feeling that is intrinsic to the human condition. It can also induce a feeling of despair and hopelessness, eroding the spirit and dampening the will to survive. However, the protagonist's experience also sheds light on the battle to reclaim a feeling of belonging and purpose within a world that has undergone an irreversible transformation. Thus, the exploration of loneliness in the context of isolation prompts a reflection on the fundamental human need for connection. It raises questions about what it means to truly live, to love, and to be part of a community. In a fragmented lonely society, the search for connection becomes not only a personal struggle, but a collective endeavor, reminding us of the critical role of relationships in building a meaningful life.

The Haunting Loneliness: Hig's Mourning and Melancholia

Loneliness is indeed a multifaceted emotion that can manifest as a response to various forms of loss, including personal, communal, and even existential losses. As Robert Weiss points out, loneliness is caused not by being alone but by being lack of some set of relationships, and it always appears to be a response to the absence of some particular type of relationship (Weiss, 1975, p. 17). As humans are considered "obligatorily gregarious animal" (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008, p. 108), the loss of family members evokes the deepest sense of loneliness among all relationships. It can result in an emotional void, leaving the bereaved feeling isolated as they traverse a world that once encompassed their loved ones. In the novel, Hig frequently reflects on his beloved wife Melissa, who succumbed to the lethal superflu. He is perpetually indulged in recollections of life before the pandemic, with Melissa occupying a significant portion of his memories. Whenever he contemplates fishing, his cherished pastime, or endeavors to make up constellations, memories of Melissa surface. In these moments, he is submerged in profound sorrow and solitude.

Like living in a hangar, sleeping outside, I can pretend there's a house somewhere else, with someone in it, someone to go back to. But who's kidding whom? Melissa is not coming back, the trout aren't, and neither is the elephant nor the

pelican. Nature might invent a speckled proud cold water fighting fish again but she will never again give the improbable elephant another go. (Heller, 2013a, p. 31)

This passage evokes a powerful sense of loss and longing for the past world and life. The imagery of living in a hangar and sleeping outside suggests an existence that is both makeshift and disconnected from comfort and stability. Hig's contemplation of his circumstances uncovers a profound emotional conflict within him—the yearning to hold onto cherished memories and the aspiration for a return to a bygone era that seems irrevocably lost. This indicates that he is grappling with a complex tapestry of sorrow, nostalgia, and perhaps uncertainty regarding his future trajectory.

Undoubtedly, Hig's grief is a “reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (Freud, 1964, p. 243). This grief could manifest as an ongoing longing for those past connections, which can feel particularly acute when isolation is heightened. It is quite evident that Hig's fixation on the loss of his family members, especially his wife and the unborn child, holds significant weight. In the novel, Melissa's name has been mentioned for 25 times, with the majority of these references occurring in the first half of the narrative which is mainly about Hig's mourning of the good old days before pandemic. For nine years, Jasper the dog has played a crucial role in alleviating his grief and soothing his loneliness, as the only nearby human, the survivalist and misanthropic Bingley, has been largely isolated from him emotionally. Through the novel, it becomes obvious that Hig regards Jasper as a member of his family, for he frequently employs the pronoun “he” when referring to Jasper and engages in ongoing conversations with him, treating him as a close friend. This inter-species encounters finally comfort Hig and makes him realized that “human animals and nonhuman animals can communicate quite well” (Willis, 2017, p. 167).

The close bond between Hig and Jasper also elucidates why Jasper's passing engulfs Hig in an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Once again, he immerses himself in the nostalgic memory, this time with a stronger connection to Jasper. While nostalgia may offer solace, evoking memories of joyful moments and meaningful connections that have once imbued his life with happiness and purpose, it also shows as a form of melancholia. This is clearly demonstrated in Hig's manifestation of deeply agonizing dejection, a loss of interest in the external world, an impaired ability to love, a suppression of all activities, and a reduction of self-esteem to such an extent that it manifests in self-reproach and self-abasement (Freud, 1964, p. 244).

However, unlike in the past, the loss of Jasper marks a pivotal point in Hig's journey to overcome his melancholia. Hig's subsequent experiences in the forest, following Jasper's departure, become a critical period of self-reflection and revelation. This period of solitude allows him to confront his grief and reflect on the profound bond he shared with his dog. The isolation of the forest becomes a transformative space for Hig—one where he can process his emotions away from the melancholia of his former life and the loss of his only companion. In the forest, Hig is forced to confront his feelings of loneliness and despair. As he navigates the wilderness, he also grapples with the essence of survival and what it means to be truly alive in a world that has changed irrevocably. This journey not only emphasizes Hig's struggle with loss but also highlights his resilience and the need to find hope even in his darkest lifetime. It becomes a metaphorical pilgrimage—one that allows Hig to honor Jasper's memory while also beginning to reclaim a sense of purpose and connection to the world around him. This phase of recuperation marks a pivotal point in Hig's emotional odyssey, driving

him to journey to Grand Junction in search of the origin of a radio signal he intercepted three years prior. This pursuit underscores his determination to break free from the shackles of loneliness.

Breaking the Chains of Loneliness: A Journey Towards Reconnection

While loss can be debilitating, it may also serve as a motivator for individuals to seek new relationships or reconnect with the outside world. Hig's desire to make connection to the outside world is stronger than ever after the death of Japser. He keeps mentioning about the radio transmission that he picked up three years ago. He eventually decides to fly out to find the Grand Junction where the radio was from. He even flies past the point of no return and lands in a pastoral ranch only because he sees,

A ranch. Cattle. The spring river flowing by. A ranch house in the shade of leafing cottonwoods and globe willows. A cracked and broken road winding by. Squint and I can imagine someone in the yard. Someone leaning to bolt a spreader to the tractor. Someone thinking Damn back, still stiff. Smelling coffee from an open kitchen door. Someone else hanging laundry in a bright patch. Each with a litany of troubles and having no clue how blessed. Squint and remake the world. To normalcy. But. (Heller, 2013a, p. 160)

This pastoral and idyllic scene unfolds like a canvas painted in lush, vibrant hues—a quintessential pastoral tableau, reminiscent of a modern-day Garden of Eden. The ranch, steeped in tranquility, stands as a testament to nature's abundance. This scene caters to the image of his long-lost "home," and only this can alleviate his state of loneliness. It justifies Hig's seemingly crazy and suicidal landing in the ranch, which is an unconscious impulse to reconnect and return to normalcy.

Hig's longing for a home reveals constantly in his narration, showing his eagerness of having a spiritual shelter. His connection with the ranch girl Cima and her father finally makes him recover from the sense of loneliness. He and Cima talks about their joyful past with their cherished ones prior to the pandemic, as well as the distressing experiences they endured during it. Acknowledging feelings of loneliness and loss is a crucial first step in coping with them. From that point forward, the novel's tone shifts to a brighter hue. At the end of the novel, Hig, Cima and her father leaves the ranch because of the coming draught and comes back to Erie to reunion with Bengly. And for the first time, he feels that he is at home and Bengly is the family member. The four individuals coexist in a pastoral manner. This also suggests the potential presence of additional tribes, signaling the onset of an end to their profound isolation and that of humanity at large. The novel ends with a famous Chinese poem by Shangyin Li with English translation as "When Will I be Home?" (夜雨寄北, *ye yu ji bei*) indicating Hig's willingness to reestablish the warm and cozy relations with others and his eagerness to rebuild the human society in the post-apocalyptic world as well.

In *The Dog Stars*, Peter Heller employs a first-person narrative to present a dystopian and post-apocalyptic aftermath after an pandemic, as experienced and survived by Hig. The entire novel can be viewed as a documentation of Hig's internal monologue, a method he chooses for self-reflection to address the trauma of his solitude. This introspective dialogue embodies a sense of compassion and sharing that is often absent in life post-epidemic. It enables Hig's emotions to cascade in a stream of consciousness, fostering self-esteem and respect as he treats himself as another person. This practice establishes a spatial framework where ideologies can be internalized through physicality and offers a stage for Hig to shed new light on the relationship between his fragmented consciousness and the external world.

In contrast to numerous novels characterized by lengthy sentences and intricate structures, the novel abounds with short, ungrammatical, and even fragmented sentences, which is a vivid imitation of the ruined world. Furthermore, this style aligns with the demeanor of a solitary individual who seldom engages in conversation or communication with others, suggesting a deterioration in his linguistic abilities. Hig's initial use of self-dialogue is also a vivid record of the raw, unfiltered thoughts and emotions that emerge in state of intense isolation. Furthermore, the fragmented and disjointed nature of his sentences reflects the chaotic state of his mind as he grapples with the loss of his wife and the destruction of the world he once knew. These disjointed sentences mirror the shattered remnants of his life, much like the broken world he surveys from his plane, a world devoid of life and filled with abandoned buildings and desolate landscapes.

In addition, the use of fragmented sentences and the absence of quotation contribute to a sense of intimacy and immediacy, drawing the reader closer to Hig's internal experience. It allows readers to witness the unfiltered workings of his mind, to feel the weight of his grief and the burden of his loneliness. We can see him sitting in the cockpit of his plane, the cold metal pressing against his skin, the roar of the engine drowning out his thoughts. The novel also reveals to the readers his gaze fixed upon the desolate landscape, with the emptiness unfurling before him—a vast void that echoes the emptiness within. Heller's option to omit quotation marks in dialogue further emphasizes the impression of a monologue rather than a conversation. The minimal or complete absence of punctuation allows for a smoother flow and pauses that are better comprehended through oral delivery (Borges, 2020, p. 108).

During an interview, Heller discloses that his purpose of using “broken and fragmentary sentences” is to signify the first instance when Hig attempts to recount his traumatized narrative, nine years after the epidemic. “The sentences are getting longer and smoother, especially as he establishes the human connection and finds love. It makes emotional sense to me” (Heller, 2013b). The progression from disjointed sentences to more coherent ones as Hig begins to establish connections with others and find love signifies his gradual healing and reintegration into society. This stylistic evolution mirrors Hig's journey from isolation to connection, highlighting the transformative power of human connection and the potential for healing and renewal in the face of adversity. In contrast to the prevailing somber atmosphere of post-apocalyptic fiction, exemplified by McCarthy's *The Road*, Heller's narrative shines as it allows Hig to traverse his solitude through dialogue, his connection with “the last woman,” Cima, and his bond with nature. In the end, we observe him extending a hand to Cima, finding solace in her companionship. We witness him soaring above the terrain, no longer in pursuit of dangers, but seeking out signs of life and hope. We see him discovering a sense of purpose in safeguarding his small community, in reconstructing the fragments of the world he can.

Thus, Heller's portrayal of Hig's journey is not merely a survival tale, but a profound exploration of the human spirit's capacity for resilience and compassion. The narrative's emphasis on the restorative power of companionship and the natural world serves as a counterpoint to the bleakness often found in similar stories. It is a testament to the enduring hope that persists even in the wake of great loss and the potential for rebirth that can emerge from the ashes of destruction.

Conclusion

Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars* dives into the profound depths of post-apocalyptic loneliness, a solitary that is inextricably related to a survival-centric and community-oriented existence in a disaster-ravaged world. Heller skillfully shows the multiple facets of loneliness from the protagonist Hig's perspective, which go beyond mere physical isolation to include the profound emotional and psychological emptiness caused by the death of loved ones and the breakdown of societal standards. The novel also underscores the intricate relationship between fear and loneliness in a post-apocalyptic world. Hig's heightened state of alertness and ceaseless watchfulness against malevolent intruders exemplify the pervasive fear that amplifies his sense of isolation. This fear not only deepens his solitude but also perpetuates a cycle of anxiety and loneliness, sustaining a state of emotional turmoil. Through Hig's perspective, we witness the vestiges of a society that has fallen apart, and the profound, yearning solitude that accompanies the loss of community and the familiar constructs of daily life. *The Dog Stars* is a compelling examination of post-apocalyptic loneliness, emphasizing its unique and profound character. Heller's warm and poetic novel challenges readers to consider the critical role of human connection in cultivating resilience and purpose in the midst of tremendous hardships in a possible post-apocalyptic lonely future.

References

- Alberti, F. B. (2019). *A biography of loneliness: The history of an emotion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Borges, M. J. (2020). Narratives of the self. In K. Barclay, S. Crozier-de Rosa, & P. N. Stearns (Eds.), *Sources for the history of emotions* (pp. 99-113). London: Routledge.
- Cacioppo, J. T., & Patrick, W. (2008). *Loneliness: Human nature and the need for social connection*. London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Freud, S. (1964). Mourning and melancholia. In J. Strachey (Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14, pp. 239-258). Hogarth.
- Heller, P. (2013a). *The dog stars*. New York: Vintage.
- Heller, P. (2013b, February 27). One book one broomfield—Peter Heller, “The dog stars” [Video]. *Broomfield County Government*. https://archive.org/details/bfcoco-One_Book_One_Broomfield-_Peter_Heller_The_Dog_Stars.
- Popp, A. (2023). “I feel as if part of [my] self was torn from me”: Entrepreneurship, absence and loneliness in nineteenth-century England. In K. Barclay, E. Chalus, & D. Simonton (Eds.), *The Routledge history of loneliness* (pp. 75-87). London: Routledge.
- Weiss, R. (1975). *Loneliness: The experience of emotional and social isolation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Willis, A. (2017). Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions. In O. Sagan & E. D. Miller (Eds.), *Narratives of loneliness: Multidisciplinary perspectives from the 21st century* (pp. 162-171). London: Routledge.