

The Loss and Loneliness in Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars*

Wenqing Cao

College of Foreign Languages, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing
210016, China

Abstract

Peter Heller, an American adventurer, describes a dystopian world after the epidemic in his debut book, *The Dog Stars*, where the ecosystem is broken, interpersonal relationships are indifferent, and the culture disappears. The book shows the fracture between human beings and nature, and demonstrates self-loss and the spiritual loneliness of human beings in the post-epidemic period. The author hopes to alert people to pay attention to the alienated relationship between people and nature, people, and culture in the post-epidemic period and warn of the disregard for species extinction, technology isolation, and cultural annihilation.

Keywords

Peter Heller; *The Dog Stars*; Post-apocalyptic; The Study of Emotions.

1. Introduction

In 2012, a post-apocalyptic novel called *The Dog Stars* was published. This novel, told in the first-person narrative, mainly depicts a story about Hig's life experience in a post-pandemic society. At the beginning of the story, the flu, stemming from the virus leakage at the National Weapons Laboratory, kills almost 99% of people in the world. Unfortunately, the convenient transportation network has become a combustion improver for the spread of the plague, with the result that survivors are met with a new round of blood diseases with high mortality. Hig, a pilot takes refuge in an abandoned airport, with an American neighbor, Bruce Bangle, and his beloved dog Jasper in Erie, Colorado. His daily mission is to fly the plane, a 1952 Cessna called the Beast, to scout an eight-mile radius and name the stars in the sky.

Once published, this novel becomes a best seller and is selected as the Apple iBooks Novel of the Year, and an Atlantic Monthly and San Francisco Examiner Best Book of the Year, receiving numerous likes and praises. The success of this novel is related to two aspects. On the one hand, the author of the novel, Peter Heller, is an American adventurer and traveler, who has had longtime contributions to outdoor adventure writing. Due to his rich adventure experience and geographical knowledge, Heller presents readers with a vivid picture of the environmental changes caused by ecological destruction in the post-epidemic era. On the other hand, Heller's realism links natural disturbances with sensory experiences and directly conveys environmental changes through rapidly changing sensory experiences and emotional reactions. He fully demonstrates the alienation of interpersonal relations and human spiritual predicament in the post-epidemic period.

The novel about the plague has always been the focus of contemporary scholars' attention. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, fictional works about violence, epidemics, catastrophes, and the end of human civilization have enjoyed great success at all levels of cultural production, which are mainly recognized as "post-apocalyptic fictions". Owing to the theme of *The Dog Stars*, Adeline Johns-Putra focuses on climate change in the novel and summarizes it into "dystopian and postapocalyptic climate change fiction" (265). She proposes that this kind of literary novel discusses various problems left over from climate change, which not only should pay attention to the existence of global warming and existentialist challenges,

but also need to cast light on human emotional and psychological dilemmas (276). In this doomsday novel, Hig seems to be the last human being in the world, inviting readers to resonate with him emotionally. With the broken and ungrammatical words, the disaster witness uses self-dialogue to build upon the demarcation and interaction among various identity elements within the self as well as between the self and the environment, for the sake of showing the predicament and survival and loneliness of spirit. This paper will focus on the lonely emotions in the novel, discussing the indifferent relationship between people and animals and people in the post-epidemic era, in order to dig out the root of loneliness and explore the cultural identity of human self-identity.

2. The Loss in the Nature: The Species Extinction

Since the birth of human beings, there has been a strong sense of affinity and belonging between human beings and nature. Born and fed in nature, people take it for granted that nature is subordinate and exclusive, and people are standing in the dominating position in the food chain. However, in *The Dog Stars*, with the arrival of the plague, the ecology has been destroyed, and human beings are deeply affected by the harsh environment due to global warming. The extinction of pigs, sheep, cattle, and poultry which have long been used as human food, threatens the living environment and sustenance of the living individual. In the face of species extinction, human beings begin to lose the dominant position in nature and return to the position in the chaotic period, deeply feeling that they are impotent and powerless in the face of natural disasters so that loneliness arises spontaneously.

In recent years, as people's attention begins to shed light on the ecological environment, people's attitudes towards non-humans have changed from "anthropocentrism", generally recognizing animal feelings and advocating animal rights. Many studies have shown the necessity of animals in people's life, and confirms that pets can relieve the stress and anxiety of their owners and that in fMRIs, pet owners who love their pets will "exhibit brain patterns similar to those patterns elicited in response to a human face when shown a picture of a cat or dog" (Willis 166). In *The Dog Stars*, Hig lives with Jasper, an Australian cattle dog, with whom Hig eats and lives together. Jasper guards surrounding safety and accompanies Hig. In other words, Jasper protects the safety of the male owner and accompanies his life, whose presence seems to be a piece of assurance, symbolizing emotional support in the post-epidemic world of species extinction. Hig calls Jasper as his "little brother. [His] heart" (108). The sudden death of his soul mate leaves him devastated and bewildered and becomes the last straw to overwhelm him. He sits in place and murmurs, "He is the only one now. The only sight. Which. Tomorrow I'll. I don't know" (108). Hig happens to repetitive and traumatic behaviors, such as fishing, patrolling, and naming stars, as if he could return to a warm and happy life. Hig wonders whether human beings could "[breed] dogs for everything else, even diving for fish, why didn't they breed them to live longer, to live as long as a man" (25). In a sense, Jasper's death cuts off Hig's hope for connecting with the outside world, which accelerates his spiritual decline and famine and pushes him to pursue his social identity and self-orientation in the world.

If loneliness can be traced back to the lost experience, then in *The Dog Stars*, loneliness is also reflected in the disappearance of a large number of species. Alette Willis links loneliness with the mass extinction of species. She points out that because the periodic loneliness of human beings for tens of millions of years prompts human beings to establish relationships with other species (170), the extinction of species can be said to be the break-off between human beings and other species. In other words, once the interdependence between human beings and non-human beings is cut off, it will lead to the feeling of being alone. In *The Dog Stars*, Hig witnesses the extinction of species, and his life returns to the primitive. His relatives and friends die one after another. Only he and his neighbor Bengley live on the high plains, facing the empty, and

endless jungle. He writes, “living in a hangar, sleeping outside can I 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 coldwater fighting fish again but she will never again give the improbable elephant another go” (31).

The harsh living environment in the post-epidemic era has widened the blood relationship between man and nature, broken the original harmony between man and nature, and made human beings feel difficult, empty and suspicious about survival. Human beings depend on the ecosystem to survive. If all non-human creatures on the earth perish, human life will irreparably disappear from the earth in a short time. In *The Dog Stars*, Hig always wakes up from a dream crying, saying that “the trout are gone every one. Brookies, rainbows, browns, cutthroats, cutbows, every one. The tigers left, the elephants, the apes, the baboon, the cheetah. The titmouse, the frigate birds, the pelican (gray), the whale (gray), the collared dove. Sad but. Didn’t cry until the last trout swam upriver looking for maybe cooler water” (1).

Non-human species are usually retained in collective memory. Most species have completely undergone cultural transformation, thus becoming a kind of cultural memory, and local biological extinction may lead to social extinction. Therefore, species extinction shows the disconnection between human beings and natural society, which is closely related to human society and becomes the collective memory of human beings. Heller connects human beings with an inseparable ecosystem, highlights the fragility and dependence between human beings and non-human beings, and provides a new way to rewrite the human self.

3. The Loneliness in the Society: The Indifferent Relationship

The issues of loneliness, homelessness, and social barriers triggered by the epidemic have also made loneliness the hottest chronic disease topic in modern society. From ancient times to the present, the emotion of loneliness has always been the motif of literary works and has been deeply explored and studied by philosophical, psychological, sociological, and other academic circles. Psychology defines loneliness as the feeling and experience brought about by subjective isolation and alienation from other people or society, loneliness is closely related to the development of the human world, and it is a kind of spiritual experience of individual life on the state of existence. In a sense, loneliness is an involuntary social pain that is caused by a lack of connection, regardless of physical and spiritual proximity to other people.

Owing to the high rate of infection and mortality of flu, human beings are separated in different places. The geographical barrier acts as the fuse for human beings to break away from society. In the book, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, co-written by John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, it is suggested that humans should be recognized as “obligatorily gregarious animals” (108). Because of the social attributes of human beings, people always communicate, exchange ideas, or trade with the outside world in order to realize their dominant position in society. When society is deprived, people enter a state of loneliness, and over time, chronic loneliness triggers a range of physiological problems, accelerating the aging process and affecting stress hormones, immune function, and cardiovascular function, among other physiological changes. In *The Dog Stars*, the epidemic cuts apart human relationships, bringing about the decay of cities and the shatter of networks. Living back to a more ancient way of life deepens the disconnection between people and people and strengthens their perception of threats, which induces people’s stronger and deeper vigilance over their surroundings. When the plague passes nine years later, the communication changes from greeting to shooting. Human beings intend to abandon goodness, moral values, and the bottom line in order to survive, with the result that the so-called trust and friendliness disappear. The impact of the loss of values and the emptiness of life shakes and disorients the

basic cultural orientation. As a result, Hig warns himself that this is what “[people] have come to this: remaking [their] own taboos forgetting the original reasons but still awash in the warnings” (48). When material needs no longer satisfy spiritual needs, survival becomes paramount. Coke becomes a “luxury” comparable to gold, just as mankind used to “the way before [people] killed for diamonds, for oil” (87). Rivka Tuval-Mashiacha puts forward four elements of loneliness: lack of need, difference, isolation, and psychological pain (11). As the moral line continues to recede, mankind is reduced to beasts competing for food, and the imbalance between the social order and the law makes morality subservient to guns and violence aesthetics. The gap in identity tears apart Hig to describe himself as a kestrel who hovers and swoops tirelessly in the field hunting mice and voles (87). Therefore, the loss of a sense of self-meaning, coupled with the loneliness of the heart, leaves Hig thirsty for the exploration and confirmation of his identity.

Loneliness in social identity triggers loneliness in the soul, a social affliction that is a stimulus to pay more attention to social relationships with a view to others reaching out and restoring frayed or broken bonds. Hannah Arendt defines loneliness as a state of homelessness due to technological automation in the contemporary world (Sagan 88). In *The Dog Stars*, loneliness is a state of individual detachment or a state of abandonment from the world. When the plague strikes, the human race, which used to be deeply affected by technology, is knocked down hard. Due to the double isolation of distance and spirit, human beings have a sense of emptiness. Hig proclaims that “I was a shell. Empty. Put me to your ear and you would hear the distant rush of a ghost ocean. Just nothing. The slightest pressure of current or tide could push and roll me. I would wash up. Here on this bank, dry out and bleach and the wind would scour and roughen me, strip away the thinnest layers until I was brittle and the thickness of paper. Until I crumbled into sand. That’s how I felt. I’d say it was a relief to have at last nothing, nothing, but I was too hollow to register relief, too empty to carry it” (197).

The human beings who depend on the internet are separated and disconnected in a depressed nature. As the communication equipment goes wrong, the only means of communication returns to face-to-face talking. Hig is used to monitoring the radio channel “Emergency frequency 121.5” for the sake of response to prove that he is not alone in the world. Unfortunately, he receives no response until the seventh year someone answers. The precious response of “Triple Three Alpha over Longmont” is like an illusion of Hig resulting in great repercussions. It can be said that in some ways mobile communication serves as a means of connecting, responding, and avoiding feelings of isolation, and social media provides a platform for humans to express their feelings and creates a wider range of opportunities for social interaction. Long-defunct communication devices deprive people of their ability to communicate and express themselves, as well as their unique social identities. When a person’s desired level of social interaction is not equal to their level of contact, a sense of identity discrepancy arises. People will receive a sense of abandonment and marginalization, with a strong sense of identity alienation and spiritual loss.

4. The Emptiness in the Spirit: The Collapse of Civilization

Spiritual emptiness originates from the crisis of existence, and its essence is related to the disconnection between subject and object, which is not only derived from the tense relation between man and nature or between man and man but also the alienation hidden in the individual spiritual world and the negation of values. In a sense, culture reflects the realistic changes of the society at that time and the thoughts and needs of human beings in a certain era. All the music and book that Hig mentions is about peace, ecology, and homesickness, such as William Edgar Stafford’s poems, a TV show named *Life After People*, a book titled *We Die Alone*, etc, which truly reflects the needs and desires in people’s heart at that time. In the hope of

seeking understanding and resonance, Hig regards books as the sustenance of his soul, appealing all his lonely feelings to literati works. However, this action can do nothing but deepen the good memories of the past. People may process and transform aesthetic objects by imagination, and associate and grasp things according to an individual's experience, preference, and intuition. Heller uses dystopian techniques to uncover the cultural dilemma under the historical appearance and uses music to reflect the desolation of the human spirit in the post-epidemic period, thus laying a foundation for human beings to seek self-subjectivity and cultural identity.

Due to the unique social and cultural attributes of human beings, people's self-identity is gradually destroyed and personal historical evidence, like photos, ID cards, passports, etc., is lost in the process of homelessness. In the social and cultural system, in every specific historical and cultural context, individuals must establish identity relations with the world and others, and follow the cultural coding procedure to determine their roles in this social and cultural order. In the novel, Banglely upholds the theory that human nature is inherently evil and violence is the only way to communicate, which caters to the hegemonic supremacy of the United States in today's society. Even if Hig is dissatisfied with such idea of gun doctrine, he never intends to take action and is subconsciously dependent on such a relationship, even trying to use family division of labor for each job to get along well and maintain harmony in order to run the operation of this precarious home. Because of the marginal and exogenous feeling formed by cultural conflicts, Hig doubts his own identity. He writes, "If I were made of different stuff, if I could defend this place myself I would shoot Banglely where he stands and get it over with. Would I? Maybe. And then I would miss this sparring every day. Probably fell it like a big void. We really have become like a married couple" (34).

Lonely survival and anxiety of survival have always been established topics in Western existentialist literature, which is a unique life experience and spiritual feeling of modern people. Loneliness can be said to be caused by the lack of cultural identity. Cultural identity is the recognition of the consensus of social relations, which can standardize people's social relations, pushing people to perform their duties and obey social arrangements.

At the beginning of *The Dog Star*, Hig asks the reader whether they have ever read *The Bible* and describes the whole world as *Lamentations* (1). Hig sets the language tone of the whole novel in sorrow with the beginning of mythology, which seems to be a confession to God. From the heart of Hig, he is abandoned and misunderstood by God, by the nation, and by his companions. This sense of isolation due to the non-existence of God leads to an inability to find universal values to act in the world and creates a sense of emptiness upon exposure to a dystopian world that reflects the individual's understanding of his or her situation.

The complexity of loneliness lies not only in the external connection between people and animals but also in their internal cognition. After nine years of struggling, Hig eventually realizes that the only person can rescue him from the lonely wilderness is himself, so he inverts the pursuit of the outside world to the peace of the inner world. In the novel *The Dog Stars*, Heller uses the first-person narrative to describe the dystopian world in the post-epidemic era in detail through the self-report of a plague experiencer and survivor, Hig. The words used are relatively simple, the sentences are broken into pieces, and the structures are ungrammatical. The dialogue of the whole text does not use quotation marks, which makes this novel more like a self-report than a conversation. Usually, a person's writing style can reflect that his or her customary culture, which refers to an intrinsic and unique expression of a wider cultural field. This cultural field is often recorded as a combination of special preferences, abilities, memories, desires, physical habits, and emotional tendencies. Heller uses the narrative mechanism of the first person to turn the loneliness and trauma in Hig's memory into an experience shared with readers, which is not only a narrative perspective and means, but also a cultural self-centeredness.

Fictional narrative genres generally use the documentary shell to prove their authenticity and use a series of techniques to describe characters and environment to have an open dialogue with readers, thus arousing readers' strong emotional effect to empathize with the experiencers. Although readers know that the characters in the novel are fictional and untrue, the protagonist in the text endows readers with the same emotions and thoughts as them.

On the one hand, readers are suggested to make a distinction between reappearance and empirical truth, and on the other hand, fictional narrative novels build an interoperable relationship between characters and readers. Heller expresses daily and extreme emotions by combining supernatural narration with realistic narration to show the author's doubts and confusion about reality, the future, and death, and his opposition towards global warming and indifferent relationships, which may arouse readers to reflect on the disappearing cultural identity in the post-epidemic period.

5. Conclusion

The extinction of species and the indifferent relationship between people both lead to the alienation of the human spirit. Peter Heller uses the first-person narrative to describe dystopia nine years after the epidemic through the self-report of the experiencer Hig, revealing the alienated relationship between people and nature, people, and culture. Through the inner feelings of Hig, Heller highlights the survival dilemma and spiritual famine of human beings. As a post-apocalyptic novel, *The Dog Stars* is forward-looking and revelatory. Its depiction of ecological devastation, species extinction, gun hegemony, and the darker phenomena of the anarchic order serves as a wake-up call for its readers, which has sounded the alarm for human beings' neglect of many problems.

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