

The Portrayal of Science and Religion in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* and Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

Shwana Q. Perot

Department of General Education, Cihan University-Erbil,
Kurdistan Region, Iraq

Abstract—In their novels, James Hilton and Walter Miller draw the readers' attention to the negative impacts of scientific and technological developments on human civilization and the environment. They portray that science and technology have become a tool in the hands of world powers for destructing humanity and the natural world. In James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* and Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, science and technology are seen accountable for the nuclear wars that caused the annihilation of humanity and the natural world. The novels proclaim that scientists and educated people are a part of today's problems as they are misrepresented by politicians. Thus, in Miller's novel a worldwide effort begins to kill the scientists and burn all the books and other materials containing scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, a group of monks and religious men preserve the relics of the world's scientific knowledge in the hope that 1 day humankind will be ready to use them decently. Moreover, both novels portray religion as an emblem of peace, rebirth, and survival of humanity; it helps science and humanity to recover and survive. This article delineates the role of science and religion as depicted in the novels from the perspectives of ecocriticism.

Keywords—A canticle for leibowitz, Humanity, Lost horizon, Religion, Science.

I. INTRODUCTION

Eco-criticism as a new literary theory brings awareness to ecological problems. Through eco-writings, readers, and critics bring environmental issues to the forefront of this interdisciplinary study. Within the field of eco-criticism, there are several subfields such as science fiction, apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, dystopian, utopian, and so on. Each of these subfields examines the ecological issues from a different point of view. For instance, post-apocalyptic as a subgenre of science fiction brings to light destructions that cause environmental or humanitarian crisis. The destructions could be natural, non-natural, or political. In addition, post-apocalyptic follows the consequences of the catastrophe and portrays how humanity attempts to survive and renew itself. In *The Representational Impasse of Post-Apocalyptic Fiction*, a critic argues that apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic depict the destruction of the world in which humanity either survives or is unable to survive due to the magnitude of the catastrophe that finally causes a complete annihilation (Cristofaro, 2013, p. 67).

Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is a post-apocalyptic science fiction novel, published in 1959. The

story is divided into three sections; Fiat Homo, Fiat Lux, and Fiat Voluntas Tua. Each section of the novel is set at a different time. The first section is set in the 26th century, the second section is in 3174, and the third section is in 3781. The story is set at a catholic monastery in south-west of the United States. It depicts the catastrophe of a nuclear holocaust and follows how humanity tries to rebuild itself (Miller, 1960, p. 1). Besides, Miller's novel shows a ruined world due to the nuclear war. Since it is a post-apocalyptic novel, the damage has taken place, and civilization tries to restore itself. The nuclear holocaust has destroyed most of the civilization and the natural world as well.

Throughout the novel, the author lays stress on the influences of science and religion on human civilization. In the novel, the scientists and experts are held accountable for the nuclear war; therefore, the scientific knowledge is at stake. The Catholic monks and religious men endeavor to preserve the knowledge that had been lost after the Great Flame Deluge. They collect the books and hide them from the public. They believe that the world is not ready to utilize them. Throughout the novel, the author poses some questions

including why does not humankind learn from its mistakes? Why does humanity is doomed to destroy itself again and again? Moreover, the story portrays religion as one of the effective tools that can save humanity and the planet. The author provides examples of the negative consequences of science and technological innovations on human civilization and on the natural world as well. The author observes that politicians misuse science and technology and use them in their own interests.

James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* also contains the themes of religion and science. The novel describes two different worlds; the politicians govern one world and the other world is governed by a theological system; monks and religious men. On the one hand, the world which is governed by politicians is devastated and destroyed due to wars and armed conflicts. On the other hand, the world which runs by religious men is portrayed as an earthly paradise. Similar to Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Hilton's *Lost Horizon* also unveils the importance of religion in preserving knowledge, wisdom, art, and literature from being burned and destroyed. In addition, both novels correct a common fallacy that considers religion as a threat to the world. They portray religion as a savor of humanity and as a representation of peace and prosperity.

II. THE PORTRAYAL OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN MILLER'S *A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ* AND HILTON'S *LOST HORIZON*

Many people assert that science and religion are in dispute with one another. There are many controversial issues between them. In other words, they are in disagreement over some frequently asked questions including who has created this universe? And how was it created? There are many other questions in which religion and science have different perspectives. However, in Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, these questions are not the concentration of the story. Preferably, the author lays stress on the relationship between science and religion and how can they save humanity and civilization from destruction and annihilation? Besides, the author also questions why does not humanity learn from its past mistakes? What should be done to avoid past mistakes? Can religion guide humankind from continuous self-destruction?

Throughout the story, the reader realizes that the world has been destroyed due to nuclear wars. Hence, the scientists are held responsible for creating the atomic bombs which resulted in the annihilation of humanity and the natural world. In other words, the novel asserts that the politicians misuse and misrepresent science and scientists that caused the destruction of humanity. As a result, a worldwide effort begins to destroy the scientific knowledge and kill scientists and educated people. Alternatively, the religious men try to preserve and collect the relics of the world's scientific knowledge. According to Miller's novel, if science does not serve humanity, it wreaks havoc on humanity and the natural world. In the novel, there are parallels between science and religion. On the one hand, science is depicted as a threat to

humanity due to the fact that it is misused by politicians. On the other hand, religion is portrayed as a representative of civilization and restoration; since it tries to save the remnants of the scientific knowledge because most of the materials containing scientific knowledge were lost and burned.

The novel sheds light a group of monks from Albertian Order Leibowitz who accumulate the scientific knowledge known as Memorabilia; their aim is "To preserve human history for the great-great-great-grandchildren of the children of the simpletons who wanted it destroyed" (Miller, 1960, p. 119-120). Hence, the preservation of the knowledge by the monks and religious men was a sort of religious duty, as Brett and Rogers, and Benjamin Eldon call it "An act of religious devotion" (2015, p. 154). By preserving the remnants of the scientific knowledge, the religious men try to save humanity from another calamity. After the nuclear holocaust, which resulted in the annihilation of human civilization and the world, science and technology were held accountable for the cataclysm. Miller brings about the scientific and technological developments and portrays their negativities as he states:

Look. Can you bring yourself to believe that that brute is lineal descendant of men who supposedly invented machines that flew, who traveled to the moon, harnessed the forces of Nature, built machines that could talk and seemed to think? Can you believe that there were such men? (Miller, 1960, p. 231).

This conversation takes place between Apollo and Thon Taddeo in *Fiat Lux*; the second section of the novel which is set in 3174. Taddeo is a scientist and a scholar; he predicts more scientific and technological developments. The quotation denotes that in that epoch, due to the scientific and technological developments man has exploited the forces of nature. The advancement of science and technology may result in space-colonization. The author however does not censure the scientific and technological developments. Rather, he censures their misapplications and negativities by authorities and politicians. Since in the novel, it is assumed that the misuse of technology and science annihilated humanity and ruined the earth. As a result, scientists, experts, and educated people were seen accountable for the cataclysm. It also asserts that if science does not serve humanity, it wreaks havoc on civilization.

Miller's novel unearths threats of technological developments if they are not used in the proper way. One can observe that even in today's era, technology has posed a huge threat to the human civilization and the planet. In their book, Nick Bostrom, and Milan M. Cirkovic claim that the advancement of technology can endanger the fate of the earth as well as humanity (2008, p. 27). If technology and science did not use to serve humanity, then they destroy humanity. Nowadays, technology is a tool in the hands of the world powers through technology, they threaten humankind.

In Walter Miller's novel, the nuclear war has ruined the earth and destroyed much of the human civilization as it is stated "On this 9th day after the destruction of the capital, gives two million, eight hundred thousand dead [...] Experts predict that the estimate will rise as more radiation cases are reported" (Miller, 1960, p. 537). Therefore, the scientists are

accused of the creation of atomic bombs which ruined the universe. Apparently, the author does not merely examine one dark side of the technological innovations. In other words, the nuclear war or the atomic bombs are not the only negativities of scientific and technological developments. Rather, the author also brings to light the travel of men to the moon and believes that it “harnessed the forces of nature.” Through this exploration, the author censures man’s anthropocentric attitude toward nature and space. The author also examines the cataclysm of the nuclear holocaust from a scientific standpoint.

Basically, the novel is set in a far-future; in three different periods. It states that the earth has become a wasteland due to the nuclear war. The novel asserts that the nuclear holocaust brought destruction to the earth and the human civilization. The devastating consequences of nuclear war would endanger everything. It would exceed the human miseries and cause huge environmental disaster as it declares “A short-term result would be an earthquake with a magnitude of 4.5, a light earthquake on the Richter scale, a long-term result would be no crops growing due to lack of sunlight” (2017, p. 69). Miller’s novel also lays stress on the negative consequences of radiation which is a result of nuclear war. Concerning the catastrophe of radiation researchers observe that “Radioactive fallout from these weapons’ debris clouds would reach the stratosphere, where it would travel worldwide, potentially contaminating crops and livestock as well as causing radiation sickness and cancer directly. Later, this fallout would cause genetic mutations in plants animals and human beings” (2017, p. 69). Although Miller’s novel is a science fiction novel, however; it thoroughly examines the cataclysm and the devastating consequences of the nuclear holocaust on different levels. The above reference scientifically proves the negative impacts of radiation on human beings, plants, and animals. Nevertheless, Miller’s novel depicts similar negative effects as he states that the nuclear war “engulfed the forests and the fields, withering trees, and caused the crops to die [...] all were sickened by the poisoned air” (Miller, 1960, p. 119). The negativities of the nuclear war are devastating; it has caused environmental and humanitarian crises.

Throughout the novel, Miller questions “How can a great and wise civilization have destroyed itself so completely?” (Miller, 1960, p. 232). This question frequently appears in the course of the novel and is one of the central themes. As it has been stated earlier, in the “Simplification” period, all the scientific knowledge was burned. Furthermore, the scientists and educated people were killed because they were regarded as the inventors of the atomic bombs, ideas, and weapons that had been used in the war. Consequently, it had resulted in global illiteracy and did not prevent humanity from the self-destruction. The author continually brings to light the collapse of civilization as he questions “Are we helpless? Are we doomed to do it again and again and again? (Miller, 1960, p. 487). Eventually, the novel provides an answer to the continuous self-destruction of human civilization “By being materially great and materially wise, and nothing else” (Miller, 1960, p. 232). Thus, according to the novel,

materialism is one of the factors for the inability of the human being to avoid the continuous self-destruction.

In James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*, the reader also comes across disapprovals against politicians, educated people and scientists. Unlike Walter Miller, James Hilton does not single out merely science and technology for being part of the destruction that the warfare brought to the planet. However, Hilton singles out politicians, especially the westerners as the reason for the wars and armed conflicts (Perot, 2021, p. 910). As they use the technological developments for the wars and use them in their own interests. In some ways, it could also be true to hold science and technology responsible for the wars. Here a question arises; can a politician create an atomic bomb? The answer would definitely be no. Thus, it could be proclaimed that scientists and technology are part of the today’s problems. As they are misused by the politicians and government officials as depicted in Miller’s novel.

Furthermore, if Hilton’s novel is examined more thoroughly, it can be observed that the central characters who took part in the battles are sophisticated and educated people. For instance, in *Lost Horizon*, Conway is the protagonist of the story and has taken part in most of the wars which has been mentioned in the novel. Prior to the wars, Conway had been one of the top students at Oxford “He was certainly clever. He had a most exciting university career-until war broke out” (Hilton, 1933, p. 10). This could be an indication that the politicians and governments use the sophisticated people and use them in their own interests. Moreover, in James Hilton’s *Random Harvest*, the same theme is depicted. Charles Rainier is the central character who had participated in the Great World. Before the war, “He had probably been to schools and received a decent education. There were things he knew that he could only have picked up from school books” (Hilton, 1941, p. 157). As it is indicated, Hilton explores the life of the central characters; before the war, they were college-educated people. Nevertheless, they both participated in the wars and were part of the destruction that the wars brought to the humanity and the planet.

Another important point raised in the novels is the importance of religion. Miller portrays the significance of religion and sees it as a solution; it brings peace and prosperity. In the Simplification period, the monks and the religious men were the only ones who preserved the remained scientific knowledge. Accordingly, the author acutely intertwines religion with science; religion takes the role of the savor of the science, knowledge, and civilization. Steven Hrotic states that in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, “religion helps science recover and ultimately saves humanity the next time we blow ourselves up” (Hrotic, 2016, p. 101). As stated earlier, Miller asserted materialism as one of the leading factors for the destruction and the collapse of humanity. Scholars argue that one of the factors that lead to materialism is the absence of spirituality. Thus, religion and spirituality have a close connection and are interrelated. Eventually, according to the novel, it could be proclaimed that lack of faith and spirituality result in the fall of civilization and contribute to the self-destruction of humankind. Religion could be a resolution to the crises according to Miller’s novel as he proclaims:

But you promise to begin restoring Man's control over Nature. But who will govern the use of the power to control natural forces? Who will use it? To what end? How will you hold him in check? Such decisions can still be made. But if you and your group don't make them now, others will soon make them for you. Mankind will profit, you say. By whose sufferance? (Miller, 1960, p. 409).

This reference elucidates that after preserving the relics of scientific knowledge questions arise over the governing the world. In the course of the novel, the reader learns that politicians are shown as unworthy to rule once again after the nuclear holocaust. This is owing to the fact that they misused the technological developments as well as the scientists. In other words, the politicians are depicted as autocratic and greedy; therefore, they should not govern the world once again. The novel illustrates that the monks and the religious men are preferred to rule the world. Consequently, the novel depicts religion as a symbol of bastion and rebirth of civilization. This is due to the fact that it helps science to recover and it brings peace and prosperity once again after the cataclysm of nuclear holocaust.

Furthermore, throughout the novel, the use of Latin language can be clearly observed. Accordingly, it's a clear indication that the author tries to display unity between science and religion. According to Cynthia M. Smith, the use of Latin language in the novel demonstrates a harmony between religion and science, because during that time, Latin was broadly used in the church as well as in science (Smith, 2006, p. 3). Linking science and religion may also denote that science without religion could result in destruction as portrayed in the novel. Therefore, science and technology should be mitigated by religion so that humanity can survive and utilize it decently.

In James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, the importance of religion is also depicted. The author highlights two different worlds; one world is ruled by the politicians and the other world is ruled by the monks and religious men. On the one hand, the world which is governed by the politicians is filled with wars and other conflicts. On the other hand, the other world looks like an earthly paradise. In addition, the author allows readers to grasp the importance of religion. In the novel, religion represents unity among different nationalities. The inhabitants of the valley of Shangri-La live a peaceful life; they live in harmony. The novel provides a fascinating description of Shangri-La which separates it from the outside world "Hunger and thirst had been appeased, if not satisfied; and the air, clean as from another planet, was more precious with every intake. One had to breathe consciously and deliberately, which, though disconcerting at first, induced after a time an almost ecstatic tranquility of mind" (Hilton, 1933, p. 73). Likewise, in Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, the world which is governed by religious men is an impeccable world. Its environment is not exploited due to the wars; it gives comfort to its inhabitants.

In an article, Alex points out that in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, the tranquility of Shangri-La lies in the hands of a theological system of religious beliefs (Alex, 2018). Subsequently, it becomes clear that the world which is

governed by religious men is tranquil and peaceful. On the contrary, the other world or the world which is governed by the politicians is turmoil and restless. Besides, *Lost Horizon* depicts politicians as greedy and power-hungry, they tend to destroy whatever is left "When they had filled the land and sea with ruin, they would take to the air" (Hilton, 1933, p. 195).

Eventually, Hilton's novel foretells the coming of Dark Ages "The Dark Ages that are to come will cover the whole world in a single pall" (Hilton, 1933, p. 241). The author gives a cautionary message to humanity; he predicts that humanity will collapse once again due to the coming of dark ages. Although both *Lost Horizon* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* are fictional novels, looking at the historical background of the novels provides an answer to Hilton's prediction of the coming of Dark Ages. Hilton's novel was written in 1933 and predicted the coming of dark ages. Meanwhile, Miller's novel was written in 1959 and called the nuclear war dark ages which caused the fall of humankind civilization.

Another point which links these two novels together is religion. In Hilton's novel, Shangri-La which is governed by a theological system becomes a haven for the people of the outside world. Likewise, in Miller's novel religion becomes a savor of human civilization. Due to religion, humanity survives once again and rebuilds itself. Consequently, Religion becomes an emblem of optimism and survival.

III. CONCLUSION

To sum up, in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *Lost Horizon*, science and technology have caused many environmental and humanitarian crises. On the one hand, the authors shed light on the negative impacts of technological developments. Alternatively, they highlight the importance of religion in bringing peace and prosperity to the world which is ruined due to the warfare. In Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* a nuclear war has destroyed the earth and civilization. Science and technology are held accountable for the nuclear war. In the novel, it is assumed that the scientists and educated people aided the politicians with their ideas, innovations and weapons which were used in the wars. Therefore, a worldwide effort begins to kill the scientists and burn all the scientific knowledge. At the heart of these conflicts, the author brings to light the importance of religion. A group of monks and religious men preserve the remnants of the knowledge and hide it from the public, as they believe that the world is not ready to utilize it. In *Lost Horizon*, the protagonist of the story is described as an educated man. However, he was used by the politicians and took part in wars and contributed to the destruction that the warfare brought to the world. In the novel, the role of religion is also depicted. The author creates a harmonious world to portray the importance of religion. That world is governed by a theological system; therefore, its people live in peace and harmony. Consequently, in both novels the authors do not censure the scientific and technological developments. Rather, they warn humankind of the threat of scientific and technological if they are misused.

In addition, the novels depict religion as a savor of humanity which brings peace and prosperity to the world. Although these novels are fictional, they carry some significant messages. On the one hand, they inform humanity of the danger of technological developments. On the other hand, they rectify a common fallacy that considers religion as the cause of wars and conflicts. The novels assert that it is the religion that brings peace and prosperity to the world which is ruined by the power-hungry politicians and the misuse of technological expansions.

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