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Possible Futures?

Analysing Societal Collapse in the Environmentally Ravaged Worlds of Monica Hughes's *The Crystal Drop* and Janet McNaughton's *The Secret Under My Skin*

Environmental degradation is a very real problem in our world today. There is a countless amount of evidence to suggest that the world is on a path that regrettably ends with complete environmental destruction. Given the importance of the issue, the lack of significant amounts of fiction dealing with environmental problems is deplorable. Still, there are some works that provide good commentary on the issues relating to the natural world. Two of such works are Monica Hughes's 1992 novel *The Crystal Drop (Crystal)* and Janet McNaughton's 2000 novel *The Secret Under My Skin (Secret)*. The greatest strength of both novels is their showing of how environmental degradation inevitably leads to some form of societal collapse. This essay will serve as an analysis of the societal collapses in the environmentally ravaged worlds of *Crystal* and *Secret*. More specifically, it will use the historical examples of Easter Island and Nazi Germany to assess the likeliness of the worlds of the novels becoming reality. Ultimately, this will lead to the conclusion that both works present frighteningly realistic possibilities for the state of our society if we do not begin to more seriously combat the problem of environmental degradation.

One of the most recognised examples of historical societal collapse can be found in the downfall of the Polynesian society of Easter Island. University of California professor Jared

Diamond is one of the leading figures in the study of societal collapse and has written quite extensively on the undoing of Easter Island society. In a paper entitled “Ecological Collapses of Past Civilizations,” Diamond provides a good overview of the island society’s breakdown. He explains that Easter Island’s inhabitants first began to live on the island sometime around the year 300 A.D. He reveals that the first settlers of the island were able to enjoy its then abundant tropical forest, using the trees as materials for both their canoes and the transport mechanisms that allowed them to set up the island’s infamous stone statues (85). However, Diamond makes clear that this situation proved to be unsustainable as the island’s population increased. The author writes:

Eventually, the forest was cleared so completely that the tree species themselves became extinct, and so did all the land birds and many of the sea birds [which were relied upon for food]. Without tree cover, topsoil eroded, agricultural yields fell, and fuel sources other than weeds and crop wastes disappeared. Without canoes, deep-sea fishing became impossible. The sole remaining large source of other protein was other humans. (85)

Diamond explains that this ultimately led to a three quarters drop in the island’s human population that was well under way when Europeans first made contact with the island in the 18th century (85). Accompanying this was a near complete breakdown of the society of Easter Island which occurred in a comparable fashion to that which occurs in *Crystal*.

The past is disappearing in the society of *Crystal*. There is very little left of the society that we have come to accept as normal in the world today. It is revealed at the beginning of the novel that the once populated home area of Megan and Ian has become deserted. All of their

neighbours have left. Further, as the children travel across the devastated landscape, it is clear that the moral norms of society have also disappeared. The children do come into contact with some good people throughout their journey. Mitch and Sadie can be held up as beacons of the positive social values of the pre-climate change world. This becomes evident when Megan inquires about paying back the couple for their hospitality. In response to her young guest, Sadie says: “Let’s have no talk of paying back. It’s only neighbourly. Like the good Samaritan picking up the wounded man from the roadside and carrying him to the inn and looking after him. It’s no more than a person’s duty” (145). However, there are others, such as the Survivalists, whose self-interested actions directly harm the children. Overall, the society in which Megan and Ian struggle is one that bears little resemblance to that of the past. It does not truly support or nurture their developments and does not contain the protective norms that prevent them from harm. This societal collapse, although quite different from that of Easter Island, follows a similar path of disintegration to that of the island nation.

As Diamond outlines in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, environmental collapse led to a complete societal collapse on Easter Island. The author describes how the complex social, political, and religious structure of the island converged into a state of civil war in which cannibalism became a common feature (109-110). It does not appear that Canada fell into a state of civil war in the world of *Crystal*. It is clear, however, that the novel’s society imploded in a fashion similar to that of Easter Island. Likewise, cannibalism does not seem to be a feature in *Crystal*. Still, the children are unknowingly forced to eat their pet dog Charlie. This is probably as close as Hughes could acceptably come to presenting cannibalism in a work of young adult fiction. Overall, it seems quite reasonable to suggest that Hughes is

successful in presenting a realistic version of what environmental collapse, and its accompanying societal collapse, could mean for the world of today.

The state of the environmental crisis in *Secret* differs greatly from the situation found in *Crystal*. Whereas *Crystal* presents a world struggling in the middle of an environmental crisis, *Secret* shows a Newfoundland that is beginning to recover from environmental disaster. It is very fortunate that the environmental degradation is beginning to reverse itself by the time the events of the novel are occurring. However, this does not mean that overall situation is improving in the novel's world. The environmental destruction in *Secret* created some significant societal problems that become very apparent throughout the book.

The society of *Secret* is completely shattered. It is a society in which division is prominent as the wealthy live in gated communities while the poor are forced to struggle in the slummy city streets. These streets serve as the territory of gangs of street children which survive by stealing and selling themselves for sexual purposes. This social structure is overseen by a corrupt and oppressive government known as the Commission. The Commission attempts to control everything within society. It falsely blames the environmental degradation of the past on scientists and was involved in a purging campaign that saw it intern and kill those with an academic background. Additionally, the truth is further obscured as the Commission lies about the state of the environment. In order to maintain its power, the government maintains that the environment is toxic and dangerous even though there is ample evidence to suggest that the damage is repairing itself. Overall, the society of *Secret* is absolutely terrifying. Unfortunately, it is also a fairly realistic representation of what modern society could become if it continues on its path of environmental destruction.

Greatly negative situations have, in the past, often been used to introduce very frightening measures within societies. As author Naomi Klein elegantly explains in her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, “in moments of crisis, people are willing to hand over a great deal of power to anyone who claims to have a magic cure” (200). This is a completely accurate statement. There are countless examples throughout history that show how bad governments and policies have been introduced on the promise that they will save a society from whatever ills it faces. One of the more well-known of these examples can be found in the rise of the Nazis in Germany.

In his book *A Short History of the Weimar Republic*, historian Colin Storer outlines how the German population was greatly radicalized during the late 1920s and early 1930s. He explains how the country’s soaring unemployment rate, falling wages, and general decline in production created a situation in which the population turned away from the moderate democratic parties in favour of the more radical options (178). Storer assesses that, “[i]n the difficult times caused by the Depression, many people were more open to the racist, nationalist and anti-democratic ideas of the [Nazis] than they would have been at other times” (181). He explains that developments ultimately led to the Nazis coming into power as the traditional powers of German society gave control to Hitler and his party (196). Once in power, Hitler’s Nazis began their authoritarian reign of terror.

As is common knowledge, the Nazi’s time in power was not a good period in German society. Their iron-fisted rule saw German society degenerate into one of the least inclusive that has ever existed. Historian Richard J. Evans has produced an excellent study of the period of Nazi rule with his book *The Third Reich in Power*. Evans makes clear that a goal of the Nazis was to eliminate all those who did not fit in with their vision of German society (536). Of course,

there was one group in particular they targeted. This group was the country's Jewish population. As Evans explains, the Jews "appeared to the Nazis as something entirely different: not a tiresome burden, but a vast threat, not merely idle, or inferior, or degenerate...but actively subversive, engaged in a massive conspiracy to undermine and destroy everything German" (536). Essentially, this means that the Jews became the scapegoats and point of blame for everything wrong in Germany. Overall, this frightening exclusive society of the Nazis definitely shares some similarities with the society of *Secret*.

It is incorrect to suggest that the Commission of *Secret* completely mirrors the Nazi party. Nevertheless, there is a distinct characteristic that both share. Like the Nazis did, the Commission comes into to power by seizing the opportunity provided by a catastrophic situation. Of course, the crisis it uses is not the same as that employed by the Nazi party. The complete environmental collapse of the world of *Secret* is not the same as the economic collapse that Germany experienced in the years leading to Nazi rule. However, like the collapse of Germany, the collapse in *Secret* leads to a crisis situation which results in a stifling authoritarian regime taking control of society. In McNaughton's novel, important character Erica explains how society fell apart to protagonist Blake. She says: "'Everyone settled into a permanent state of emergency. There used to be a form of government called democracy that gave ordinary people some power. That disappeared. People allowed governments more and more power because it was necessary'" (86). This is exactly how things happened in Nazi Germany. In response to the country's situation, Hitler and the Nazis were given more and more power. Therefore, using the example of the rise of the Nazi party, it is reasonable to suggest that a crisis situation like that of *Secret* could realistically result in the ascent of a government like the Commission. The similar

rise of an authoritarian government is not the only resemblance that the society of *Secret* has with Nazi Germany.

In *Secret*, the scientists become the scapegoats for the environmental decimation of the world. Returning to Erica, the character explains to Blake the Commission's view that "[t]echnology is so dangerous, it must be controlled by the state" (51). Essentially, this means that having scientists developing and working on technological advancement does not fit in with the Commission's plan for society. Therefore, the scientists are given a societal position that marks them as being undesirable and damaging. In what is referred to as the Technocaust, it is revealed that scientists were rounded up, interned, and often killed by the Commission. To propose that the scientists of *Secret* are placed in the same position as that of the Jews of Germany during Nazi rule is irresponsible. There is little evidence to confirm that the events of the Technocaust matched the same level of horror that the Jews faced during the Holocaust. Further, race was not a factor in the killing of scientists in *Secret*. Still, the novel's scientists hold the position of being scapegoats for society's problems just as the Jews became the misguided point of blame in Nazi Germany. This suggests that McNaughton's depiction of a society focused on an incorrect and unfairly targeted enemy is a feasible possibility if a devastating environmental collapse were to occur in our current world.

The similarities between Nazi Germany and the society of *Secret* must not be overstated. However, the novel's scenario of a crisis resulting in the rise of an authoritarian government acting against an unjustly blamed group within society does share some resemblance to the elevation of the Nazi party in Germany during the 1930s. This shows that the course of action occurring in *Secret* is not completely unlikely and that there is historical evidence to suggest that an oppressive regime could be a potential consequence for society after a complete

environmental collapse. This does not mean that the rise of a Nazi-like regime is inevitable in an environmentally degraded world. It does, however, serve as a warning that the possibility exists that modern society will become very oppressive if more attention is not paid to the current environmental issues.

To conclude, comparing the worlds of *Crystal* and *Secret* to the historical examples of Easter Island and Nazi Germany shows that terrifying societal collapse is a reasonably possible outcome of environmental destruction. Unfortunately, the majority of people in our society still choose to ignore or neglect the reality of what is being done to the natural world. Our society still abuses the environment under the mistaken impression that the human race will persevere and survive as the world deteriorates around us. This mindset needs to change. We are at a crossroads when it comes to the problem of environmental degradation. We need to choose the path that leads to a clean and healthy life for both the human race and the planet itself. If we fail to do this, our society may come to mirror the terrifying societies that Hughes and McNaughton have created.

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