In a world that is ever-changing, it is natural to hold on to aspects of life that one is familiar with. Ideas of hope and peace become a safe haven for people in the midst of a catastrophe; however, what does one do when all hope is lost? When the world begins to crumble and no longer resembles life as it once was, people are expected to rebuild. When all that is left is rubble, people must rely on their use of words and rhetorical skills to reconstruct society. For even though technology and government structures may fail, words withstand the test of time. The idea of rhetoric being able to transcend catastrophes can be found throughout the genre of post-apocalyptic television series. This is seen in post-apocalyptic television shows like *The Walking Dead* and *The 100* where leaders emerge to help reconstruct society. As fallen structures lead to chaos, morality is put into question and people often seek security and reassurance in the form of a rhetorically skilled leader.

### Defining the Post-Apocalyptic Genre

The genre of post-apocalyptic fiction became increasingly popular after World War II. With the decimation of the Jews, people realized how fragile human life was in addition to how easily rights could be taken away. People were left frightened as the idea of humanity was questioned. With the Cold War on the horizon, "the potential global annihilation of nuclear war threatened to bring a final end from which there would be no rebirth" (Stifflermire, 2017). People wanted to know if something worse was on its way. The post-apocalyptic genre reflects overall cultural worry and attitudes about the possibility of a bleak future.

While many consider the apocalypse to be a time of devastation, Samuel Stifflermire suggests that it not only marks the end of a world, but the beginning of a new one. This is an important distinction, since it marks the opportunity for a new beginning. He explains the term post-apocalypse, stating that, "The post-
apocalypse is a gap, a dilation, between one ordered existence and the post-apocalyptic revealing of the next” (p. 4). The post-apocalypse becomes the idea of a world between times of order. This is relevant when considering the television genre as it embodies the idea that characters must become survivors during this post-apocalyptic time of chaos. Their fragmented lives, once filled with order, are now unpredictable, and, as a result, they must navigate this new terrain until the unveiling of the next world. It is during this time that many of these television series take place. This is a defining factor of the post-apocalyptic genre as it seems to focus on a world that has not only lost structure but hope as well. As a unit, the survivors of such catastrophes must come together to face this loss of hope. They do so by seeking out a leader whose character imbues morality back into the broken systems of the fallen world. Under the leadership of such moral characters, the post-apocalyptic genre shows a battle of human nature where people must fight to keep their humanity intact when all else is lost.

Molthagn-Schnoring (2013) suggests that people form a sense of collective identity in the face of fear through this transition from disaster to the potential unveiling of the next world; this identity is based on fear and mistrust. In turn, this forms what the author refers to as a “risk society” where people evaluate their lives based on how secure they are. People base this notion on past events. In fact, the author suggests that memories of past events help imbue the present with meaning. For this reason, it is through epideictic, or commemorative, speeches that disasters are remembered. This can often be seen throughout the post-apocalyptic television genre as emerging leaders attempt to restore order by comparing their ideas to the mistakes of past leaders (Molthang-Schoring, 2013). This idea is exemplified in the post-apocalyptic television show The 100.

**The 100**

Within this show, two opposing characters use rhetoric to lead armies against each other. However, these two conflicting characters utilize rhetoric in vastly different ways. While Octavia is a brutal leader who uses fear to employ effective persuasion, Kane opposes her in the way that he uses his eloquence to his advantage. As post-war radiation has destroyed the Earth, a group of 1200 survivors were sent to live in an underground bunker. The two opposing clans from the outside world, Skycrew and the Grounders, were forced to come together and form one crew (Wonkru), but, as supplies dwindled, conditions became brutal and political relations worsened. Now that Octavia Blake is the leader of Wonkru, she is forced to calm rising tensions. However, she strategically uses fear to her advantage by relating the past to the present. This is the idea of Molthagn-Schnoring (2013). She reminds her people of past times of chaos and compares where they were then to where they are now. By doing so, she attempts to lead them in a new direction by encouraging them to not repeat their past.

By commemorating past events, people can generate ideas for the future, since “Catastrophes often incite an environmental consciousness and deliberative acts of rhetoric that generate action” (Molthagn-Schnoring, 2013). Depictions of the past in turmoil allow the orator to paint a picture of a new future. This then creates public awareness and a desire to produce change. One can begin to see the rhetorical power of commemorative speeches when orators begin to step forward and use the idea of fear to sell their ideas, specifically since “causes of social anxiety are often exaggerated by agents who view such fears as a means to advance certain measures of social control and political consensus” (Molthagn-Schnoring, 2013). This is evident in the show The 100. Because of tensions between groups fighting for what little resources remain, Octavia uses the threat of death to ensure order. She repeats the mantra, “You are Wonkru, or you are the enemy of Wonkru. Choose” (Rothenberg, 2018). This is important as it demonstrates her goal to unite the two opposing clans; however, if the person does not choose to abide by the rules of Wonkru, they are sentenced to a bloody death.

Octavia’s internal struggles as a leader are demonstrated in Season Five, Episode Two, when Octavia speaks to another character, stating that she is not a political leader, but a warrior and a fighter, which is evident through her actions. While she is able to use rhetoric effectively, she is a brutal leader. This directly contrasts the idea that Quintilian was making when he said that the perfect orator is “a good man, skilled in speaking” (p. 2). Octavia was never schooled in the way of words; however, she knew how to use intimidation to her advantage. One way she did this was by
attending court dressed in the blood of her people. For this reason, she became known as Blood Reigna (Blood Queen). In addition, her reputation and morality were put into question when she commanded her subjects to consume the bodies of their dead. While this instilled fear in those who dared question her rule, it kept the crime rate down in addition to keeping her people fed. While effective, her actions were in no way considered moral; rather, they were actions of a person doing everything within her power to keep herself and her people alive, even if that meant sacrificing a part of her humanity. Her actions do, however, coincide with the ideas of Peter Ramus (2010) who stated that, “The definition of an artist which covers more than is included within the limits of the art is faulty” (p. 4). Therefore; Octavia proves that one can be a successful orator without having to hold fast to strong morals. She was an effective leader as she was able to keep her people alive during their time in the bunker. Ramus continues to say that rhetoric is not the art of being virtuous. To ask Octavia to be both a good leader and virtuous would be to go beyond the realm of rhetoric. In this way, she rules by fear, for no one dares to question Blood Reigna, except one man, known as Marcus Kane, who is tired of her brutality.

The actions of Marcus Kane embody another rhetorical aspect of commemorative speeches, specifically the idea that orators can question the ethos of past leaders. As blame is placed on those responsible for disaster, trust is manipulated for people to feel secure in their current situations. This is also demonstrated in The 100 when Kane calls into question Octavia’s leadership. After blindly following orders, he begins to resist by questioning the length that they will blindly follow orders. When another character makes the excuse that they have only done what it takes to survive, he responds by saying, “No, that’s what we say to justify the horror that we inflict on each other” (Rothenberg, 2018). These words are the beginning of a rebellion.

After being wrongfully accused of a crime, Kane is condemned to fight for his life in the fighting pits. During his time there, he does something extraordinary. He refuses to fight. Inside the arena he cries out, “I will not kill this man!” He then goes on to explain why he refuses to fight for his life. He insists that life without virtue is not a life worth living. He calls out to the audience, justifying his reasoning by saying, “somehow, we allowed justice to become vengeance and vengeance to become sport . . . My complicity ends today” (Rothenberg, 2018). This directly corresponds to ideas that Cicero was teaching during his time. In fact, Cicero stated “For who is ignorant that the highest power of an orator consists in exciting the minds of men to anger, or to hatred, or to grief, or in recalling them from these more violent emotions to gentleness and compassion?” (p. 11). However, the most powerful part of this idea is that he states that an orator not only has the power to put an audience into a state of mind, but that he has the power to recall them from the more violent emotions and persuade them to those that are gentler. This is Cicero’s idea that the power of an orator lies in the ability to excite and calm thoughts and emotions. This is exactly what Kane is doing at this time. He is inciting feelings of rebellion while calming the peoples’ thirst for blood.

What separates Kane from Octavia is his eloquence. “For the proper concern of an orator, as I have already often said, is language of power and elegance accommodated to the feelings and understandings of mankind” (Cicero, 1875). While Octavia uses her actions and position as a warrior, Kane uses his skill at speaking to lead the masses against her reign. Through Kane’s mercy and gifted speech, he converts people to his side. Cicero (1875) said that there is nothing “more noble than to be able to fix the attention of assemblies of men by speaking, to fascinate their minds, to direct their passions to whatever object the orator pleases, and to dissuade them from whatsoever he desires” (p. 6). He then follows up by saying what is greater than an audience being swayed by the words of one man. This is exactly the power that Marcus Kane is able to hold over the masses of The 100.

**Pestilence**

While epideictic speeches arise in times of crisis, other forms of rhetoric, such as the rhetoric of fear, can be seen in the idea of pestilence. Although pestilence is another common theme within the post-apocalyptic television genre, the ideas of pestilence originated much earlier. The article “Infectious Fear: The Rhetoric of Pestilence in Middle English Didactic Texts on Death” suggests that pestilence opens the gateway for fear. As disease spreads and pandemonium is inevitable, people will then begin to see a rise in fear rhetoric. As this article looks at the Medieval period, it is important to remember that Christian teaching was widely
upheld, and, for this reason, people associated the idea of pestilence with sin. In fact, it was believed that to avoid divine punishment in the form of pestilence, one must abstain from sin. Tom Lawrence (2017), states that this very idea "may have been deployed by medieval authors for rhetorical purposes" (p. 2). He suggests that authors during this time period used the outbreak of the Bubonic Plague to their advantage: authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer wrote to audiences who were entirely unprepared to die.

As the epidemic of plague took the people by storm, authors wrote about impending death. This potential apocalypse is demonstrated in Chaucer’s "The Pardoner’s Tale." Essentially, Lawrence (2017) suggests that Chaucer is using pestilence rhetorically in the sense that he is urging his readers to reflect on their fleeting lives on Earth in addition to their spiritual future. Lawrence states that Chaucer “seeks to frighten the pilgrims into believing that death targets the sinful and, in doing so, profit from the selling of pardons” (p. 4). This creates a sense of urgency that spurs the audience to action. As the Black Plague spreads, it takes people off guard. What is worse than dying without being pardoned from one’s sins? For sudden death without absolution could lead to eternal suffering. This idea reiterated the teachings of the church and thus, Lawrence argues, was the didactic purpose of the story. This idea represents the notion of the apocalypse, as for these people, the plague and potential death was a disastrous end to the world as they knew it.

The Walking Dead

The idea of pestilence can be seen in modern post-apocalyptic television series. Specifically, in the show The Walking Dead pestilence is presented in the form of zombies. Once again, the idea of pestilence is rhetorical in the sense that pestilence serves the purpose of instilling fear into the audience to get them to consider their morality. Morality becomes a central focus of the show as characters must choose what is right or wrong in a world that has no rules. As the survivors learn to navigate the post-apocalyptic terrain, people fight for the position of leader, but one man’s use of language and moral character causes him to stand out above the rest. In The Walking Dead, this character is Rick Grimes.

Now that the remaining community has become a “risk society” that lives in constant fear for their safety, the group must collectively draw upon past ideas of morality to determine what is best for the group. This is stated by the author of “Rhetoric in Times of Crisis: How Financial Institutions Try to Restore Confidence” when she says that “By drawing on past experiences, we can generate an understanding of ethos and character and in turn assess the trust we have in those in charge of providing the value of security in risk society” (Molthagn-Schnoring, 2013). For the characters of The Walking Dead, trust is given to Rick Grimes.

Photo by Tookapic.
Because of his ethos, people seem to look to him as a natural leader. As Quintilian stated, "vileness and virtue cannot inhabit jointly the selfsame heart" (p. 357) This is true when observing the character Rick Grimes. Even before the destruction of the world, Grimes was depicted as an honorable man, for he was a sheriff, and, as an enforcer of the law, he was encouraged to live by a strict moral code. He embodied the idea presented by Quintilian in the way that only virtue resided in the heart of Rick Grimes. This becomes evident in his actions and reactions to the destruction of the world. Grimes recollects that "The first time I saw a walker, it was just half a body, snapping at me from the ground, and my first inclination wasn't to kill it" (Darabont, 2010). While many people would have immediately shot the potential threat, Rick showed mercy by not killing the creature he encountered. Even though it was repulsive and potentially dangerous, he stil led viewed it as a life that deserved respect. This act shows that Rick was less susceptible to the loss of humanity that occurred after the apocalypse. While others lost those aspects that distinguished humans from walkers, Rick Grimes remained human by holding on to his moral character.

In addition, he further separated himself from the beasts by using the very gift that Quintilian suggests distinguishes humankind from other living creatures—the gift of speech. He used the idea of ethos, logos, and pathos throughout the series' first season and incorporates these methods of persuasion into his language to effectively persuade his fellow survivors. For instance, in Episode 2, the group is forced to mask their scents by chopping up a dead walker. However, before members of the survivors begin brutally chopping up the dead body, Rick stops them by pulling out the man's wallet. He takes a moment to remind the group that the dead walker was once a living person who still deserves to be respected. He then promises that he will forever remember the walker's sacrifice for the survival of his group. In fact, he states that "If I ever find my family, I'm going to tell them about Wayne" (Darabont, 2010). This use of ethical appeal falls in line with Quintilian’s belief that no orator is effective unless he is a good man. Without virtue, Rick Grimes would not be as persuasive and effective in evoking emotions.

At the end of Season One, Episode 5, Rick’s use of pathos becomes evident as the group of survivors travel to the Centers of Disease Control. As they find the doors locked, many members of the group begin to lose hope; however, Grimes fights to restore the group’s sense of security. When he sees the camera move, he calls out to the one survivor left in the CDC. He then successfully uses pathos to allow him access through the door. He does this by calling out, "Please, we are desperate. Please help us. We have women and children. We have no food" (Mazzara, 2010). When these pleas do not work he then cries out, "You are killing us," and with those words, the doors are open (Mazzara, 2010). Because Rick Grimes successfully used pathos by appealing to the emotions of the CDC survivor, he was able to ensure the safety for his group. His raw emotions were an appeal at what humanity was left in the survivor hiding in the CDC, thus Rick successfully caused another character to consider morality in a world rapidly losing such ideals.

Conclusion

As The Walking Dead and The 100 are both examples of worlds between times of chaos and order, they provide examples of how morality can be lost in times of post-apocalyptic crisis. Without the emergence of powerful leaders with the ability to use rhetoric effectively, humans begin to see a loss of humanity in a world without rules. With the techniques of such outstanding men and women, structure is able to be restored, and the survivors are able to endure the transition between one ordered existent to the next.

Works Cited


The citation system used in this essay is APA 6th.