

10. Moralizing The Weather

Defoe, The Lay-Man's Sermon upon the Late
Storm (polemic)

Defoe, "An Essay on the Late Storm" (poem)

ENGL133 Imagining Nature

Course Stuff

Heads up for next week:

we'll be starting Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones* (1-57)

Smith, Selections from *Blood Dazzler* (Canvas)

Not required but Recommended reading:

Meneley and Taylor, Introduction to *Anthropocene Reading* (Canvas)

-We'll spend 2 weeks on the Ward novel then move on to Octavia Butler's novel, *Parable of the Sower* for 2 weeks

THE
Lay-Man's
SERMON
UPON THE
LATE STORM;

Held forth at an Honest
Coffee-House-Conventicle.

Not so much a Jest as 'tis thought to be.

Printed in the Year 1704.

The Lay-Man's Sermon Upon the Late Storm

- published in February 1704
- unlike the journalistic treatise *The Storm* which dramatized many voices in the eye-witness accounts, the *Lay-Man's Sermon* speaks in a single voice: that of the political moralist
- a "layman" as opposed to a cleric, a "sermon" as opposed to an opinion piece

An Essay on the late Storm

- published with *An Elegy on the Author of the True-Born-English-Man* later in 1704
- not a prose "essay" but a poem
- "essay" meaning "to test out a hypothesis"

AN
ELEGY
ON THE
AUTHOR
OF THE
True-Born-*English-Man*.
WITH AN
ESSAY
ON THE
STORM.

By the Author of the *Hymn to the Pillory.*

LONDON, *M.H.*
Printed in the Year, 1704. *M*

Genre and Natural Disaster

- Defoe wrote a secular “sermon” and a satiric poem that outlined what he thought were the causes and the blame associated with the storm
- In the poem “An Essay on the Late Storm” he talks about himself as the “Satyr”-that is, the satiric writer who has been legally “silenced” by having agreed to a 7 yr “good behavior” clause as part of his libel settlement
- what genres do we associate with this type of writing / media today?

Daniel Defoe's Politics and the Storm of 1703

-he was a supporter of the staunch Protestant King William III (William and Mary) who had deposed his Catholic predecessor James II in 1689

-King William III died in 1702 and was succeeded by his cousin/ sister-in-law Anne

-in religion, Defoe was a Dissenter, that is, a “low church” Protestant who believed in reforming the contemporary Church of England (the “high church”)

-he believed in religious freedom for different strains of Protestants (not for Catholics)

-he thought that English Protestants should stop fighting each other at home and instead should fight Catholics in France and Spain abroad

-how do storms get moralized? what pre-existing ethical systems do storms make apparent?



“The Lay-Man’s Sermon” and the Voice of the Storm

The shatter'd Palaces of our Princes Preach to us, and tell us aloud, that without respect to Dignity, he is able to put that Dreadful Text in Execution; That if a Nation does wickedly they shall be destroy'd both they and their King.

The fallen Oaks, which stood before to tell us they were the longest liv'd of all God's Creatures, Preach to us, and tell us that the most towering object of humane Beauty and strength must lye humble and prostrate, when he is pleased to give a Check to that Splendor which was deriv'd from his Power.

The Wrecks of our Navies and Fleets Preach to us, that 'tis in vain we pretend to be Wall'd about by the Ocean, and ride Masters of the Sea: And that, if he who bestow'd that Scituation upon us thinks fit, he can make that Element which has been our Strength, and the Encreaser of our Wealth, be the Grave of our Treasure, and the Enemy of our Commerce; he can put it into so violent Agitation, by the blast of his Mouth, that all our Defence and the Naval Strength we have vallued our selves so much upon, shall at once be swallow'd up in the Mouth of our Friend the Sea; and we shall find our Destruction in the very thing from which we expected our Defence.

Our Seamen and Soldiers, whose Dead Bodies Embrace the English Shores, Preach aloud to us, that whenever we think fit to Embark them on any Design, which Heaven approves not of, he can blast the Embrio, and devour those People whose Hands are lifted up against Justice and Right.(4)

-pronouns? repetition?

What Language Do Writers Use to Convey the Storm's Moral?

Figures of Speech: *The Lay-Man's Sermon upon the Late Storm* and Prosopopoeia

“The Voice of his Judgements is heard in the Voice of Nature, and if we make our selves Deaf, he is pleas'd to make them speak the Louder, to awaken the stupified senses, and startle the World” (3).

“In publick Callamities, every Circumstance is a Sermon, and every thing we see a Preacher” (4).

- The idea of non-human witnessing
- the physical world testifies about the causes in the human world

Prosopopoeia=A rhetorical figure that gives a human voice to an inanimate thing

-a species of personification

-the Greek prosopon poien is “to confer a mask or a face.”

-cf. to Emerson's poem “Song of Nature” that spoke in nature's voice

What Language Do Writers Use to Convey the Storm's Moral?

Satire and "An Essay on the Late Storm"

I'm told, *for we have News among the Dead,*

Heaven lately spoke, but few knew what it said;

The Voice, in loudest Tempests spoke,
And Storms, which Nature's strong Foundation shook.

I felt it hither, and I'd have you know

I heard the Voice, and knew the Language too.

Think it not strange I heard it here,
No Place is so remote, but when _he speaks_, they hear.

Besides, tho' I am dead in Fame,

I never told you where I am. (ll. 1-10)

-who is the narrator? What do we learn about him?

-he says in the next stanza that he is in limbo

-goes on to explain how political and religious divisions are the causes of the storm

Who or What is Responsible? How Does Responsibility Work?

Collective vs. Individual Responsibility

Every one thinks it to be a Judgment upon the Person or Parties they see touch'd with it. W—— the Carpenter was knock'd on the head with a Stack of Chimneys, and his Wife saved; all the Neighbours cried out 'twas a Judgment upon him for keeping a Whore; but if Stacks of Chimnies were to have fallen on the Heads of all that keep Whores, *Miserere Dei*. ...

'Tis plain to me, who ever are Punish'd by the Storm, we that are left have a share in the Judgment, and a Trebble [i.e. triple] concern in the Cause. ... [We] have all had a hand in the general provocation, though not an equal share in the general Calamity. (*Lay-Man's Sermon*, 5-6)

-how does responsibility work?

-Guilt vs innocence?

-The moral problem of the unevenness of effects: weather/ climate change does not punish everyone according to their guilt/ responsibility

What is the Moral of the Storm for Defoe? I

The Storms above reprove the Storms below,
And 'tis too often known,
The Storms below do Storms above
Forerun;

-what do these lines mean?

-how does the analogy between different types of storm work?

They say this was a High-Church Storm,
Sent out the Nation to Reform;
But th' Emblem left the Moral in the Lurch,
For't blew the Steeple down upon the
Church.

-what does it mean that the “Emblem left the Moral in the Lurch”?

From whence we now inform the People,
The danger of the Church is from the
Steeple. (Defoe, “An Essay on the Late Storm”
ll. 293-300)

What is the Moral of the Storm for Defoe? II

When ever our rulers think fit to see it [i.e. moderation], and to employ the Men and the Methods which Heaven approves, then we may expect success from abroad, Peace at home, prosperity in Trade, Victory in War, plenty in the Field, Mild and Comfortable Seasons, Calm Air, Smooth Seas, and safe Habitations.

Till then we are to expect our Houses Blown down, our Pallaces Shatter'd, our Voyages broken, our Navys Ship-wreck'd, our Saylors Drown'd, our Confederates Beaten, our Trade ruin'd, our Money spent and our Enemies encreased.

. . .
'Tis plain Heaven has suited his Punishment to the Offence, has Punish'd the Stormy Temper of this Party of Men with Storms of his Vengeance, Storms on their Navies, Storms on their Houses, Storms on their Confederates, and I question not will at last with Storms in their Consciences.

(Lay-Man's Sermon, 7-8).

- “natural” disasters always have human referents
- -they are only given meaning once they are inserted into human social narratives

Modern Prosopopoeia and Nature

2019 Climate Action Summit

Opening remarks of UN Secretary-General António Guterres

“Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

Nature is angry.

And we fool ourselves if we think we can fool nature.

Because nature always strikes back.

And around the world, nature is striking back with fury.

Consider the last few months.

July — the hottest month ever.

June through August — the hottest summer in the Northern hemisphere ever; and the second hottest winter in the Southern hemisphere ever.

The years 2015 to 2019 — the five hottest years on the books ever.

Our warming earth is issuing a chilling cry: Stop.”

In Class Writing: Moralizing Modern Storms

Work with a partner but write down your answers separately with your name on it so you can turn it in at the end of class (unless you are both in the same section).

1. Choose a modern storm or natural disaster that has hit in the last 5-10 years, such as January 2025 LA wildfires, 2024 Hurricane Milton, or 2022 Hurricane Ian (or any storm of your choosing). Do a quick on-line search about it looking at at least 2 different kinds of sources. Note them down.
2. How is the storm/ natural disaster described? Give an example of rhetorical language. What makes it vivid?
3. How is responsibility for the disaster discussed (collective vs. individual)?
4. What is the moral of the storm? Is it the same in both sources?