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# The Changing Nature of Catastrophe: A History of Semantic Shift

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THE CHANGING NATURE OF CATASTROPHE:  
A HISTORY OF SEMANTIC SHIFT

By

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Honors Scholarship Project

Submitted to the Faculty of

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## ABSTRACT

Catastrophe, and the reporting of catastrophe, is prevalent in the present age, and catastrophic events are a part of the cultural memory. For America, events such as 9/11, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Hurricane Katrina, and the Challenger explosion, along with many other events, have filled newspapers and books, inspired documentaries and memorials, and, in many ways, reshaped the country. This paper investigated the changing nature of the word "catastrophe" and discovered the context of and the reasons for the shift in its meaning in 1748, as recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary. The Greek roots of the word, dictionary and encyclopedia entries, books, and newspapers were consulted to create a framework for an investigation of the scholarly, social, cultural, and political use of "catastrophe" in both England and America.

*Keywords: catastrophe, disaster, newspapers, denotation, connotation*

## INTRODUCTION

“Catastrophe” is a word that creates a reaction. When a news source labels an event as a catastrophe, one expects that certain criteria, however arbitrary or subjective, will be met. Years of writers and reporters pair the word “catastrophe” with adjectives like “great,” “lamentable,” “terrible,” and “horrific,” and these words are meant to inspire fear and concern. The history of “catastrophe,” however, is far broader than its present connotation. The Greek roots of the word, its use in drama, its shift in meaning as it emerged in popular literature, and its extension of connotation must be examined in order to understand how catastrophe shapes culture.

There are many issues surrounding the definition of “catastrophe.” The first is its original definition and use in Greek. The word is a combination of the prefix κατα-, meaning “down,” and the verb στρεφειν, meaning “to turn.” The word’s initial meaning incorporated a sense of a reversal of fate. As such, the original usage of the word garnered a theatrical connotation, referring in particular to the turning point in a drama.<sup>1</sup>

The early meaning and definition of the word, however, gave way to a reimagining of “catastrophe” in 1748. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first use of “catastrophe” to mean “sudden disaster”<sup>2</sup> in the 1748 publication of *A Voyage Round the World, in the Years MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV*, by George Anson. This definition has

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1. Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), s.v. “katastrephw.”

2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online version, s.v. “catastrophe.”

characterized its usage up to the present age. The shift in its definition raises many questions, presenting the opportunity for an investigation into the history of the word's meaning and usage.

In order for an analysis of the current popular meaning of the word to be significant, an analysis of the previous meaning of the word is necessary. The inception of the word in the Greek language, as well as its usage until 1748, provide a unique lens through which one can interpret the present meaning and usage of "catastrophe." For this reason, several questions regarding the theatrical definition of the word must be examined, including the prevalence of its usage until 1748 and the prevalence of its usage after 1748.

Furthermore, the year of 1748 must be examined in detail to uncover the social, political, economic, and cultural climate that surrounded and influenced the shift in definition. The texts of this time period are of particular importance because they define the cultural understanding of the word for years to come. In the same way, newspapers dating in 1748 and since 1748 must be examined. Both the scholarly use of the word and the popular use of the word must be explored in order to present an accurate representation of the contextual use of the word. The themes of these sources, particularly in the years immediately surrounding 1748, offer an enriched understanding of the reason—or, perhaps, necessity—for the shift in the definition of "catastrophe," as evidenced by shifts in its usage.

In addition, the examination of the dictionaries and encyclopedias of the time offer a frame within which to consider the definition of catastrophe. Descriptive



dictionaries and encyclopedias record the popular usage of a word and the context surrounding a word; as such, they offer a record of how scholars in the past have examined the cultural shifts that were reflected in the changing denotation of catastrophe.

As the denotation of catastrophe changed, there is also the issue of a shift in connotation. The response of writers to catastrophes influenced their use of catastrophe instead of disaster or calamity, which, in turn, influenced the public's understanding of a particular event. Thus, the cultural context of the 1740s and 1750s provide the reasons for the necessity of a word such as catastrophe and for its increased usage in both the scholarly and social realms, but not necessarily in the theatre.

"Catastrophe" and catastrophes have thoroughly captured the public imagination. Beyond the descriptions of catastrophic events in newspapers, books have been written that deal specifically with the cultural fascination or obsession with catastrophe. Slowing down and looking out the window at a vehicle accident site is a common occurrence. Likewise, television viewers flock to screens to watch catastrophic footage. Some writers, such as Don DeLillo, write satirically about the human response to catastrophe. Other writers analyze those texts and offer hypotheses about how catastrophe and culture are interrelated and, possibly, inseparable. Regardless of the form that these meditations on catastrophes take, catastrophe has invaded the minds of modern English speakers. "Catastrophe," however, does not acquire the sense of "disaster" until the eighteenth century. The word originated in Greek, and an

understanding of the Greek meaning is imperative to a larger understanding of catastrophe's role in the modern era.

## THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF “CATASTROHPE”

The logical place to approach the study of a word is its origin, and “catastrophe” originated from ancient Greek. Catastrophe is constructed from two component parts: *κατα-* and *στρέφειν*. The Greek preposition *κατα-* means “down” and the Greek infinitive verb *στρέφειν* means “to turn”.<sup>3</sup> Early usages of *καταστρέφω* have a variety of connotations, both negative and positive. Liddell and Scott include definitions as varied as “turn down, trample on,” “upset, overturn...ruin, undo,” “subdue,” “turn round, direct,” “bring to an end.”<sup>4</sup> These various definitions suggest that, even in ancient Greek texts, the connotation of catastrophe was neither definitively negative nor definitively positive.

When *καταστρέφω* came into English, after first passing through Latin and French, the connotation was no less ambivalent. Eric Partridge traces the development of catastrophe’s meaning, noting that the literal definition is an “overturning”. That, in itself, has a neutral connotation. The denotation, however, was later applied figuratively as an “upsetting, hence a conclusion, esp[ecially] in drama, of a tragedy”. After the application to a drama, the breadth of the definition was further extended to include any “ruin [or] a great misfortune,”<sup>5</sup> even outside of the theatre.

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3. Robert K. Barnhart, ed., *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*. (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1999), s.v. “catastrophe.”

4. Liddell and Scott, s.v. “katastrephw.”

5. Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge & Paul, 1959), s.v. “strophein.”

In English, catastrophe's primary definition prior to 1748, therefore, was that of the "denouement of a drama,"<sup>6</sup> a sense that emerged in the sixteenth century in Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender*: "This tale is much like to that in Aesops fables, but the catastrophe and ende is farre different."<sup>7</sup> In Palsgrave's translation of Fullonius' *Comedy of Acolastus*, "catastrophe" simply denotes the "concluding action of a drama, often a reversal of what is expected."<sup>8</sup> In this comedic context, "catastrophe" is very clearly differentiated from a necessarily negative connotation. Jeff Jeske notes that "Spenser's first recorded use of catastrophe (1579) did not carry the tragic implication but referred simply to the change that brings about the conclusion."<sup>9</sup> The use of catastrophe in conjunction with comedy validates this early sense, as "commentators and dramatists viewed catastrophe as an aspect of comedy as well as tragedy."<sup>10</sup>

Catastrophe, however, possessed a certain amount of fluidity within drama. In the early 1600s, the catastrophe in Shakespeare's *King Lear* occurs at the beginning of

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6. C. T. Onions, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), s.v. "catastrophe."

7. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online version, s.v. "catastrophe."

8. Barnhart, 150.

9. Jeff Jeske, *Storied Words: The Writer's Vocabulary and Its Origins* (New York: iUniverse, 2004), 63.

10. Alan Rosen, "Ends and Means: 'Catastrophe' in the Context of Dramatic Form and Theory," *Samuel Beckett Today* 2 (1993): 327-334, <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed September 15, 2014).

the play rather than at the end. Rosen asserts that this shift forces Lear to “endure four acts in the aftermath of the catastrophe...making the play one long catastrophe.”<sup>11</sup> The effect of this shift is that catastrophe was no longer necessarily associated with the final act of an early dramatic work. Instead, “catastrophe” was positioned to take on a broader meaning that was not restricted to dramatic works.

As “catastrophe” became associated with tragic downfalls, the word “denouement” largely replaced the theatrical sense of catastrophe. Denouement, a loanword of French origin that emerged in English in the eighteenth century, literally means “untying,”<sup>12</sup> a sense that was evidently more suited to describing the falling action of a drama regardless of fortune or misfortune. Notably, in 1748, the *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first instance of “catastrophe” used to mean a sudden disaster in George Anson’s *A Voyage Round the World*. Since the emergence of this broader usage of “catastrophe” occurred contemporaneously with the rise of “denouement” in English, “denouement” was remarkably well-suited to take catastrophe’s place as the referent of a dramatic conclusion.

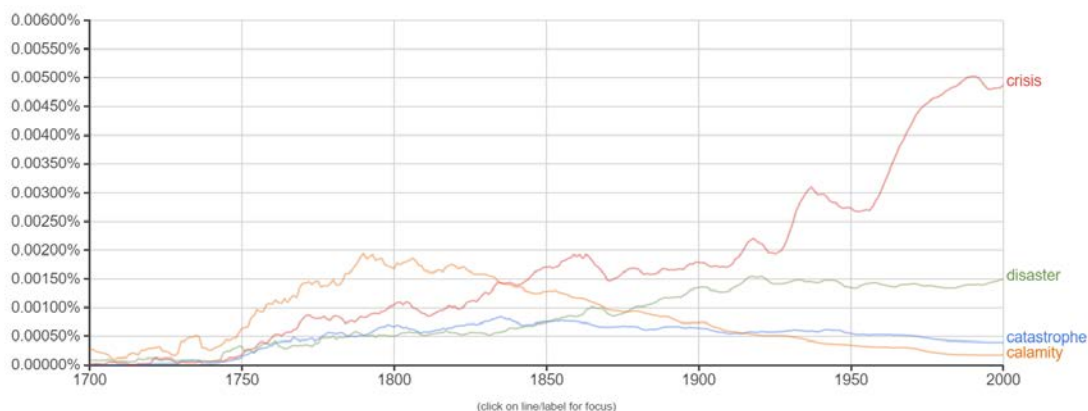
Catastrophe, however, was not the only English word to describe unexpected horrific events and downfalls. “Crisis,” “calamity,” and “disaster” are often recognized as synonyms of “catastrophe.” Figure 1 shows that, of the four words, “calamity” is most frequently used from 1700 to the early 1800s, at which point “crisis” is used considerably more than the other three synonyms.

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11. Rosen, 328.

12. Jeske, 63.

Fig. 1: Comparison between the relative usage of crisis, disaster, catastrophe, and calamity in digitized books from 1700 to 2000.



Source: Jean-Baptiste Michel, Yuan Kui Shen, Aviva Presser Aiden, Adrian Veres, Matthew K. Gray, William Brockman, The Google Books Team, Joseph P. Pickett, Dale Hoiberg, Dan Clancy, Peter Norvig, Jon Orwant, Steven Pinker, Martin A. Nowak, and Erez Lieberman Aiden, *Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books*. Published online ahead of print: 12/16/2010.

McNamee discusses the diverse etymological origins of calamities, catastrophes, and disasters, but ultimately concludes that “when disaster or catastrophe or calamity strikes, none of us, rational or no, worries much about the etymological rightness of each of those terms.”<sup>13</sup> Even though it would be more etymologically correct to refer to a loss of a crop as a calamity, an overturning as a catastrophe, and “an event under the

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13. Gregory McNamee, “Of Calamities, Catastrophes, and Disasters,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 90, no. 2 (2014): 231. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed September 15, 2014).

influence of a...wayward...star”<sup>14</sup> a disaster, the distinction is rarely made in modern English because the definitions of these words have been so divorced from their etymological origins. Thus, while it is accurate to say that “catastrophe” rightly means an overturning or a downturn, its popular usage has greatly expanded the events which one can identify as a “catastrophe.”

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14. McNamee, 231.

## ENGLAND: THE 1700S

The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites George Anson's *A Voyage Round the World*, a travelogue published in 1748, as the first work to use "catastrophe" in the broader sense of a sudden disaster. The cultural context of England, the location of this shift in meaning, warrants examination, since the political, religious, and cultural forces that were shaping England itself were also shaping the way the Britons viewed their world and the ways in which they interacted with their world.

In the 1700s, Britain's worldview was changing and expanding rapidly. In 1707, the Act of Union joined Scotland to England and Wales, creating a new socio-cultural dynamic that challenged the identity of the Britons. Colley argues that it was during this time of great change that "a sense of British national identity was forged, and...the manner in which it was forged has shaped the quality of this particular sense of nationhood and belonging ever since."<sup>15</sup> The Act of Union was not the only significant change in the 1700s, though; beginning in the 1700s, Britain engaged in more than a century of wars with France. In addition, the colonial expansion of European powers, Britain and France in particular, expanded British influence throughout North America, Africa, Asia, and Europe.<sup>16</sup>

It is perhaps fitting, then, that the meaning of "catastrophe" was extended through its use in travel texts. Anson's text is not unique; travelogues were a common

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15. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 1.

16. Colley, 1.



literary form in an age of exponentially increasing travel. In fact, catastrophe occurs in Elisha Kent Kane's *Arctic Explorations: The Second Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin*. Kane writes that "[t]his fishery is fearfully hazardous; scarcely a year passes without a catastrophe."<sup>17</sup> Anson records that "[t]hus were we all...reduced to the utmost despair by this catastrophe."<sup>18</sup> In this use, catastrophe not only acquires the sense of a disaster, but it has fully lost the restriction that it previously had of referring to the conclusion of a dramatic work. Even after the catastrophe to which Anson refers, the separation of the ship's crew in which "those on shore conceiv[ed] that they had no means left them ever to depart from the island, whilst we on board, being utterly unprepared to struggle with the fury of the seas and winds...expected each moment to be our last."<sup>19</sup>

Another important aspect of early British life was religion. Protestantism was prevalent, and the Britons believed that God protected them and that they were chosen by him to fulfill some special purpose. Part of this purpose was to fight against Catholicism, and the strength of this belief can be seen on the Frontispiece to *The Protestant Almanack*. Three items concern deliverance from the Popery—first by King Edward VI, second by Queen Elizabeth, and third by King William and Queen Mary. The Frontispiece continues to denote that "The Bloody Aspects, Fatal Oppositions, Diabolical

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17. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online version, s.v. "catastrophe."

18. George Anson, *A Voyage Round the World, in the Years MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV*. 5th ed. (London: John and Paul Knapton, 1749), 293.

19. Anson, 293.

Conjunctions, and Pernicious Revolutions of the Papacy against the Lord and his Anointed are described.”<sup>20</sup>

Fig. 2: Frontispiece to *The Protestant Almanack*, London, 1700.

The PROTESTANT  
**ALMANACK,**  
For the Year 1700.

Since	{	The Creation of the World ————— 5706
		The Incarnation of Jesus Christ ————— 1700
		England received the Christian Faith ————— 1510
		Martin Luther wrote against the Pope. ————— 184
		Our first Deliverance from Popery by K. Edward VI. — 152
		Our second deliverance from Popery by Q. Elizabeth — 141
		The horrid design of the Gun-Powder Plot ————— 95
		The Burning of the City of London ————— 34
Our Third Deliverance from Popery, by K. Will. & Q. Mary 12		

Being the  
**BISSEXTILE or LEAP-YEAR.**

WHEREIN

The Bloody Aspects, Fatal Oppositions, Diabolical Conjunctions, and Pernicious Revolutions of the Papacy against the Lord and his Anointed, are described.

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With the Change of the Moon, some probable Conjectures of the Weather, the Eclipses, the Moons place in the Zodiack, and an account of some principal Martyrs in each Month.

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Calculated according to Art, for the Meridian of *Babylon*, where the Pope is elevated a hundred and fifty degrees above all Right and Religion; above Kings, Canons, Councils, Conscience, and every thing therein called God. *2 Theff. 2.* And may without sensible Error, indifferently serve the whole Papacy.

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By *Philoprotus*, a well-willer to the Mathematicks.

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London, Printed by *John Richardson* for the Company of  
STATIONERS. 1700.

Source: Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 21.

20. Colley, 21, Frontispiece to *The Protestant Almanack*, London, 1700.

Ultimately, the Lord's Anointed believed that trials were an inevitable and important part of life. "Suffering and recurrent exposure to danger"—which can include catastrophes—"were a sign of grace, and, if met with fortitude and faith, the indispensable prelude to victory under God."<sup>21</sup> In the face of wars, religious opposition, imperial expansion, and a changing national identity, the Protestant faith provided a way for Britons to reconcile their identity as the Lord's Anointed with the trials and challenges of a rapidly-changing world.

Another important implication of the British Protestant religious identity is that Britons were inclined to relate their own lives to the lives of the biblical characters they valued and admired. If the Israelites were God's chosen people of a century past, surely the lives of the British Protestants, God's Anointed in the present century, were comparable to the lives of biblical figures. As such, the British "superimpose[ed] the language of the Bible on their own countrymen's progress through life and towards redemption."<sup>22</sup> The trials faced by the British were justified in part by parallel difficulties that faced the Israelites. David Hume, a Scotsman, wrote about this phenomenon in his 1757 essay "The Natural History of Religion," in which he discusses the unique ability of Protestantism "to display the advantages of affliction."<sup>23</sup> Catastrophe, disaster, and crisis could, therefore, be seen as ultimately advantageous.

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21. Colley, 28-29.

22. Colley, 30.

23. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 31, 42, quoted in Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of*

As far as written material in the early 1700s is concerned, religious texts and newspapers were among the most popular printed material. With regard to national identity, Colley suggests that the press served to unify Great Britain and further the British understanding of their own exceptional identity.<sup>24</sup> Since the inception of the London *Daily Universal Register* in 1785, the newspaper that became the London *Times* in 1788, articles detailing events—including catastrophes—in regions throughout Britain created a more unified sense of the country through the shared experience of regional news. For this reason, an analysis of the use of “catastrophe” in the London *Times* is particularly important.

As the 18<sup>th</sup> century progressed, trade and commerce emerged as equally important aspects of the British national identity. This expectation of economic success emerged from the patriotism and Protestantism of the early 1700s; as God’s Anointed, the British came to expect that their business endeavors would be blessed by God and, therefore, financially successful. Trade became increasingly important, in part because “domestic and foreign trade...supplied the bulk of taxation.”<sup>25</sup> Foreign trade necessarily led to an increase in travel, whether by land or by sea, and an increasing likelihood that one would suffer a catastrophe or natural disaster, as seen in Anson’s and Kane’s travelogues.

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*Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 38.

24. Colley, 40.

25. Colley, 65.

As the 1700s continued, the British identity continued to be influenced by trade, empire, and conflict. The Protestantism and patriotism that were established in the early 1700s continued to shape the way Britons responded to internal conflict with the Scots and external conflict with, among others, the American colonists. Even though, or perhaps because, the American colonists “rejected both the authority of the British Parliament and in the end their own residual British identity,”<sup>26</sup> the American response to and use of “catastrophe” is equally important in determining the extent to and manner in which both the denotation and connotation of “catastrophe” have shifted.

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26. Colley, 105.

## AMERICA: THE MODERN YEARS

Though the American understanding of catastrophe is, in many ways, similar to that of the British, the distinct development of America requires and deserves its own consideration. The American understanding of calamity does, however, follow a similar path as that of the British. In the 1700s, American religious leaders viewed catastrophes as the means by which God corrected and rebuked his people. In a new world that was necessarily challenging—physically, mentally, and spiritually—colonists reconciled their present struggles with their future hopes by viewing catastrophe as a necessary stepping stone to progress: “They...imagin[ed] disasters as ‘blessings,’ as instruments of religious salvation, moral reformation, and (ultimately) material improvement.”<sup>27</sup> Just as did the Britons, the American colonists married their religion and expectation for material success, and they reconciled the inevitability of catastrophe and hardship by identifying catastrophe as a cause that necessarily preceded their desired effect.

Another element that is vital to understanding the American interpretation of catastrophe is the belief that trials and catastrophes identify sins and human evils. There was a corrective element of catastrophe, which meant that trials were not necessary only to identify the Christians as God’s chosen people but also “to purify the saints so that they could become worthy to inherit the earth.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, ministers such as Increase Mather responded to catastrophe much as the citizens of Nineveh responded to the

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27. Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 32.

28. Rozario, 44.

destruction of their city: with a call for repentance and reformation. In 1676, after a fire destroyed Mather's house and church, he called his congregation to reform "lest greater Fires be kindled, and more Candlesticks be removed out of their places, and then it be too late to prevent those evils which as yet may possibly be diverted."<sup>29</sup>

After some time, though, calamity in America became more than an opportunity for creative destruction, which is "the notion that modern capitalist systems require the continual obliteration of outmoded goods and structures to clear space and make way for new production and development."<sup>30</sup> Instead, the American public, aided by mass media reporting of catastrophic events, came to see these terrible events as nothing more than a spectacle. Philosophies that concerned themselves with the sublime encouraged the American public to view disasters as stirring, moving emotional experiences. Furthermore, news media felt obligated to report catastrophes, so the increased publicity of catastrophes "reveal...a growing preoccupation with the education of the community."<sup>31</sup> Thus, in the 1800s, "a hunger for sensational disasters was becoming a prominent feature of everyday American life...And just as disasters sold newspapers, so did newspapers feed appetites for disaster."<sup>32</sup>

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29. Increase Mather, "renewal of Covenant the Great Duty Incumbent on Decaying or Distressed Churches," in *Departing Glory*, preface, quoted in Rozario, 48.

30. Rozario, 76.

31. Françoise Lacovat, "Narratives of Catastrophe in the Early Modern Period: Awareness of Historicity and Emergence of Interpretive Viewpoints," *Poetics Today* 33, no. 3-4 (2012): 255.

32. Rozario, 111.

In fact, as the American appetite for disaster grew even larger in the late 1800s and early 1900s, amusement parks and movies staged and reenacted disasters and catastrophes in order to capitalize on this growing desire to experience safe disasters that found a balance between reality and representation. As time passed, “decades of attending movies had reinforced the tendency of Americans to establish a consumer relationship to images of chaos.”<sup>33</sup> In an ironic turn of events, the real footage of flooding in the Bay Area of San Francisco in 1906 “failed to find a wide audience because it was unable to compete with a more dramatic fake depiction produced in New York by the Biograph Company.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, news coverage was often sensationalized so that the truth could be as emotionally stirring as dramatic reenactments.

In the 1950s, this trend continued. Movies and television shows continued to portray disasters and catastrophes, so these “simulated disasters began to set the standard for spectacles of destruction,”<sup>35</sup> especially as special effects grew in prominence, sophistication, and usage, “generat[ing] novel forms of storytelling.”<sup>36</sup> As a result, actual events began to be discussed and interpreted through the lens of cinema. The terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001, for example, were described by “eyewitnesses and news reporters alike...[with] phrases from blockbusters.”<sup>37</sup> People compared the

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33. Rozario, 136.

34. Rozario, 136.

35. Rozario, 166.

36. Lacovat, 255.

37. Rozario, 166.



destruction to movies they had seen that portrayed similar events. Thus, this particular catastrophe, rather than inspiring sensationalism and recreation, was viewed through the lens of fabricated stories. Rozario concludes that “the boundary between man-made and natural catastrophes is one that seems to matter less and less to most people in postmodern America.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, though, the distinction between the real and the unreal has blurred, and the American public has begun to superimpose its expectations for cinematic disaster on real life.

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38. Rozario, 180.

## CATASTROPHE IN ENCYCLOPEDIAS AND DICTIONARIES

Within the context of the American and British worldview from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to the modern day, “catastrophe” has changed greatly in both denotation and in connotation. The first edition of Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755, defines a “catastrophe” as “the change or revolution, which produces the conclusion or final event of a dramattick piece...a final event; a conclusion generally unhappy.”<sup>39</sup> In both definitions provided by Johnson, the “catastrophe” is associated with the end or conclusion. There is, therefore, a sense of finality. The second definition of “catastrophe” also includes, however, a sense of the connotation that persists today, albeit much intensified: general unhappiness.

The earliest definition of “catastrophe” provided by the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in 1771, only contains the dramatic definition of “catastrophe”: “in dramatic poetry, the fourth and last part of the ancient drama, or that immediately succeeding the catastasis.”<sup>40</sup> This entry fails to provide the second, more complex definition that Johnson gives; instead, it places catastrophe squarely in the realm of drama.

A later edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the 1911 edition, still includes the original Greek understanding of the word with regard to drama, but it also traces the semantic extension of the word: “a term of the ancient Greek drama for the change in

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39. Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1st ed., s.v. “catastrophe.”

40. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1st ed., s.v. “catastrophe.”

the plot which leads up to the conclusion. The word is thus used of any sudden change, particularly of a violent or disastrous nature.”<sup>41</sup>

The 1828 edition of Webster’s *International Dictionary of the English Language* gives the following definitions for “catastrophe”: “the change or revolution which produces the final event of a dramatic piece; or the unfolding and winding up of the plot, clearing up difficulties, and closing the play...a final event; conclusion; generally, an unfortunate conclusion, calamity, or disaster.”<sup>42</sup> In this edition, the primary definition of “catastrophe” refers to the dramatic sense of the word and the secondary definition denotes the definition more relevant to the modern usage of “catastrophe.” These definitions are reversed, however, in the 1890 edition of the dictionary.

The 1890 edition of Webster’s *International Dictionary of the English Language* provides the following definitions of “catastrophe”: “an event producing a subversion of the order or system of things; a final event, usually of a calamitous or disastrous nature; hence, sudden calamity; great misfortune...the final event in a romance or a dramatic piece; a denouement, as a death in a tragedy, or a marriage in a comedy.”<sup>43</sup> There are several interesting elements of this definition. The first definition adheres rather closely to the original sense of “overturning” or “to turn down.” The extension of this first meaning gives the general understanding of “catastrophe” that is currently used. The

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41. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. “catastrophe.”

42. *International Dictionary of the English Language*, 1st ed., s.v. “catastrophe.”

43. *International Dictionary of the English Language*, 1890 ed., s.v. “catastrophe.”

second definition, however, hearkens back to the earliest of English definitions of the word when “catastrophe” was still related to drama and theatre. The definition does not only associate “catastrophe” with “denouement”; it also provides examples of good and bad catastrophes: “a death in a tragedy, or a marriage in a comedy.” These opposing examples defer one’s ability to assign “catastrophe” either a negative or a positive connotation, and these examples persist in the 1913 edition of the dictionary.

This reversal of primary and secondary definitions reflects the changing nature of “catastrophe.” As a descriptive dictionary, *Webster’s Dictionary* reflects the changes in usage of particular words. As “catastrophe” was increasingly used to refer to sudden disasters and decreasingly used to refer to the final events of a dramatic work, the two definitions were reversed in order to reflect the popular trend in usage.

An 1893 edition of *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, which would later become the *Oxford English Dictionary*, gives several definitions of “catastrophe,” the first two definitions of which are the definitions that Johnson provides in his dictionary published in 1755. A third definition proves to be far more general: “an event producing a subversion of the order or system of things.”<sup>44</sup> A fourth definition is far more familiar to the modern man’s understanding of catastrophe: “a sudden disaster, wide-spread, very fatal, or signal. (In the application of exaggerated language to misfortunes it is used very loosely.” This parenthetical comment on the application of this final definition “catastrophe” explains the tendency of nineteenth century writers to use catastrophe almost without discretion.

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44. *A New Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 1st ed., s.v. “catastrophe.”



## CATASTROPHE IN THE LONDON *TIMES*

The London *Times*, originally the London *Daily Universal Register*, provides a good vehicle for analyzing the changing nature of “catastrophe” in popular, sensationalistic writing. I arbitrarily selected articles, usually one article from each decade, to study the relationship between “catastrophe” and other words. From the inception of the *Daily Universal Register* in 1785, “catastrophe” has been used in conjunction with a variety of words that tend to have negative connotations, furthering the understanding and interpretation of “catastrophe” as a sudden disaster.

In the late 1700s and the 1800s, “catastrophe” tended to be used with words such as “disastrous,” “fatal,” and “distressing.” In a May 4, 1789 article, it was reported that “[a] catastrophe no less disastrous than that of the ingenious and indefatigable Captain Cooke, has happened to the Navigators.”<sup>45</sup> The catastrophe to which the article refers is that the Navigators were roasted and devoured by savages, an end that seems to require the use of “catastrophe” in the non-dramatic sense of the word. The positive sense of the word did not fade out of use entirely, though. A January 14, 1792 article referred to “the catastrophe of comedy.”<sup>46</sup> In general, however, the accounts are riddled with catastrophes that involve disaster and death: an August 7, 1824 article details an “extraordinary poisoning” that resulted in a “tragical catastrophe;”<sup>47</sup> a suicide

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45. *Times* (London), May 4, 1789.

46. *Times* (London), Jan. 14, 1792.

47. “Extraordinary Poisoning,” *Times* (London), Aug. 7, 1824.

reported on November 22, 1838, is described as a “fatal catastrophe.”<sup>48</sup> In 1849, “catastrophe” is used to describe a situation that was avoided rather than a railroad crash that actually came to fruition: “The public narrowly escaped a rightful catastrophe on Tuesday.”<sup>49</sup>

There are other interesting elements that can be identified in articles from the mid-1800s. In November 27, 1855, another railroad catastrophe was recorded as “one of the most singular railroad catastrophes that we have had to record for many years.”<sup>50</sup> Even as early as the 1850s, it would seem, newspaper sensationalism was a part of recording “catastrophe.” The newspaper felt it was its obligation to record the catastrophe and to point out the singularity of the situation. On November 25, 1861, a “Dreadful Catastrophe” occurred and “caused the utmost excitement and consternation in the city.”<sup>51</sup> This article records the public response to catastrophe and to the reporting of catastrophe—from an early time, catastrophes moved people emotionally and physically.

Another common trend in the reporting of catastrophes is the comparison of a recent event to an older event. As seen in the first entry cited, the catastrophe was “no less disastrous than that of the ingenious and indefatigable Captain Cooke.”<sup>52</sup> This trend

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48. *Times* (London), Nov. 22, 1838.

49. “Atrocious Conduct,” *Times* (London), Sept. 8, 1849.

50. “Strange Railroad Catastrophe in America,” *Times* (London), Nov. 27, 1855.

51. “Dreadful Catastrophe at Edinburgh,” *Times* (London), Nov. 25, 1861.

52. *Times* (London), May 4, 1789

continues; in a May 10, 1875 article, the catastrophe was “in the magnitude of proportions and the peculiar horror of its circumstances has not often been surpassed...almost any other recent parallel would fail.”<sup>53</sup> On May 6, 1897, the *Times* reported on a “disaster which has plunged France into mourning and draws to her the sympathy of the whole civilized world...in no event can the number of those who have lost their lives approach that of the holocaust at the Ring Theatre in Vienna in 1881, or in one or two other historical fires...From all sides messages of condolence continue to reach the French capital.”<sup>54</sup> This article not only compares the fire of 1897 at the Bazar de la Charité in Paris to other historic fires; it also includes evidence that those outside of France were moved to sympathy by the news of the catastrophe. This article also used “disaster” and “catastrophe” synonymously.

In the 1900s, the reporting of catastrophes continued. In February, 1906, 55 South African natives drowned in a mine catastrophe; in September 1919, a decline in exchange rates in Sweden “was threatening to develop into a catastrophe;”<sup>55</sup> in December, 1922, a scientist meditated on the potential destruction of the Sun and earth as the result of a nova’s explosion. This article, interestingly, cites a passage from Revelation to reinforce and emphasize its point about the catastrophes that will occur at the end of the world.

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53. *Times* (London), May 10, 1875.

54. *Times* (London), May 6, 1897.

55. “Swedish Exchange Rates,” *Times* (London), Sept. 1, 1919.



In the 1930s and 40s, reports of World War II were frequently associated with “catastrophe.” In 1938, Chamberlain’s flight to Germany was described as “a race against catastrophe” with “an epic quality of magnificent gamble for the highest stake in the world.”<sup>56</sup> In 1944, Italians were denied the right to use the Italian equivalent of “catastrophe”; instead, they were to use “emergency” to describe catastrophic situations. In March 1946, German starvation following the war was described as a “catastrophic food situation.”<sup>57</sup>

After the war, language of “catastrophe” was still used to describe both mundane and truly singular disasters. In 1968, one reporter described a catch in a cricket game as catastrophic.<sup>58</sup> In 1978, a clergyman described an unpleasant court case and the deaths of his daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter as a “series of catastrophes.”<sup>59</sup> He, however, returns to the idea of catastrophes as opportunities for personal growth. Job losses in the car industry were described as a catastrophe in 1982. In 2009, Gordon Brown warned that a failure to make a climate deal at Copenhagen would result in a “catastrophe for the planet...that...could be more costly than two

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56. “A Race Against Catastrophe,” *Times* (London), Sept. 16, 1938.

57. “German Plea for Food,” *Times* (London), Mar. 12, 1946.

58. Jack Fingleton, “Catastrophic Catch,” *Times* (London), July 27, 1968.

59. J. R. Youens, “Coping with Catastrophe,” *Times* (London), Sept. 19, 1978.

world wars and the Great Depression.”<sup>60</sup> Finally, in 2015, an earthquake in Nepal was described as a disastrous event that “also caused cultural catastrophe.”<sup>61</sup>

In almost all of these articles, it is evident that “catastrophe” is commonly associated with sudden disasters, whether man-made or natural. Catastrophes occur in the social, cultural, and political spheres. Potential catastrophes are avoided, and catastrophes that actually occur are compared to similar historical events. Sensational, singular catastrophes garner sympathy. The end of the world is a catastrophe, but so is a catch in a game of cricket. Catastrophes are personal and nationwide. In some contexts, “catastrophe” carries some sense of the early meaning of a final occurrence, but in most cases, regardless of the predominant descriptive meaning of the time, “catastrophe” is associated with fatality and disaster.

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60. Philippe Naughton, “Brown warns of ‘catastrophe’ without Copenhagen climate deal,” *Times* (London), Oct. 19, 2009.

61. Norman Hammond, “Nepal quake opens up cracks in time,” *Times* (London), Oct. 24, 2015.

### CATASTROPHE IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

An analysis of the *New York Times*, published first in 1851, provides an interesting and important point of comparison to the London *Times*. These two newspapers allow one to compare the usage of “catastrophe” in Great Britain and in America throughout the 1800s, 1900s, and early 2000s. In general, the use of “catastrophe” in the *New York Times* is similar to, and perhaps even more specific, than the use of “catastrophe” in the London *Times*.

Newspaper sensationalism is associated with James Gordon Bennett and the *New York Herald*;<sup>62</sup> regardless, the *New York Times* provides a good contrast to the London *Times* due to its national credibility and international focus. The *New York Herald*, though, first published in 1835, doubtlessly influenced the *New York Times* with regard to accruing readership. Sensationalism in newspapers existed primarily to develop a larger readership. The editor of a similarly sensationalistic penny paper, Benjamin H. Day of the *Sun*, wrote in the paper that “[w]e newspaper people thrive best on the calamities of others.”<sup>63</sup> This remark is not singular to the *Sun*; it applies to all newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the London *Times*. Bennett’s papers were littered with articles about “violence, crime, murder, suicide, seduction, and rape,

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62. James L. Crouthamel and Andrew Jackson, “James Gordon Bennett, the *New York Herald*, and the Development of Newspaper Sensationalism,” *New York History*, 54, no. 3 (1973): 294.

63. Benjamin H. Day, *New York Sun*, Sept. 5, 1833, quoted in James L. Crouthamel and Andrew Jackson, “James Gordon Bennett, the *New York Herald*, and the Development of Newspaper Sensationalism,” *New York History*, 54, no. 3 (1973), 297.

both by straight news reporting and by gossip.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, these articles are representative of the early sensational articles published by the *New York Times* that used the word “catastrophe.”

In the late 1800s, the *New York Times* reported numerous railroad catastrophes or near-catastrophes, just as the *London Times* did in the 1850s and 60s.<sup>65</sup> In 1862, a lightning storm killed two women in what was called a “Shocking Catastrophe.”<sup>66</sup> In 1886, “disaster” and “catastrophe” are used synonymously to describe the deaths of twenty.<sup>67</sup> In 1892, a reader’s letter to the newspaper about the political state of the city encouraged the citizenry to “not...go off rainbow chasing while we are struggling to avert a catastrophe to our civilization.”<sup>68</sup>

In the 1900s, reporters used the word “catastrophe” to describe a variety of events. In April of 1906, an article analyzed the surprisingly minimal effect of catastrophes on the stock market. This article uses “catastrophe,” “disasters,” and “calamities” synonymously.<sup>69</sup> On May 29, 1912, a description of the *Titanic* disaster is

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64. Crouthamel and Jackson, 299.

65. “The Burlington Catastrophe,” *New York Times*, Sept. 6, 1855; “Another Misplaced Switch,” *New York Times*, Nov. 4, 1872.

66. “Shocking Catastrophe,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1862.

67. “The Silver Creek Disaster,” *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 1886.

68. Lynchburg Virginian, “Political Notes,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1892.

69. “Catastrophe Markets: How Stocks Were Affected Last Week by Disasters,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1906.

described as a “marine catastrophe...[the] world’s worst wreck.”<sup>70</sup> In July, 1927, the same decade in which an English scientist pondered world catastrophic destruction by a nova’s explosion, a writer proposed that an archive of newspapers and scientific works should be created in the event that the world was destroyed by “a glacial period, gas from another planet, [or] a horde of barbarians.”<sup>71</sup> In 1935, a sports article used very violent, militaristic language to describe the National League game: “It was a catastrophe that wrapped the territory along the Harlem River in deep gloom and left the Polo Grounds a lovely scene of desolation.”<sup>72</sup>

The *New York Times* also reported the banning of “catastrophe” for Italian troops “from all reports and orders and also from vocabulary in general.”<sup>73</sup> After the war, more mundane occurrences, such as water in the basement of a suburban house<sup>74</sup> and forgetting to bring mustard on a picnic or camping trip,<sup>75</sup> were described as catastrophes, but so too were ministerial warnings of the end of the world. In 1948, one

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70. “The Titanic Report,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1912.

71. T. Kennard Thomson, “Novel Plan to Aid Survivors of a World Catastrophe,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1927.

72. John Kieran, “Sports of the Times: The Giants, an Ungripping Mystery,” *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 1935.

73. “Word ‘Catastrophe’ Taboo in Nazi Orders in Italy,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1944.

74. “Swimming Pool is Built into Basement of House,” *New York Times*, Nov. 17, 1957.

75. Jean Hewitt, “Living Off the Land: Campers Can Be Gourmets, Too,” *New York Times*, June 9, 1966.

preacher predicted that “the world is heading for catastrophe on a cosmic scale but the only catastrophe human beings have to fear is loss of their souls.” He believed, like Increase Mather, that “[w]hen catastrophe comes men turn to God.”<sup>76</sup> Likewise, in 1951, Rev. Billy Graham predicted that catastrophe would strike New York City and that “only an ‘old-fashioned spiritual awakening’ can save the world from disaster.”<sup>77</sup> These predictions of catastrophe and repentance are more prevalent than in the London *Times* and reflect the American history of evangelistic calls for repentance after catastrophe.

One article, published in 1971, examines the question of America’s preoccupation with catastrophe: “Some days it seems that everybody is in love with catastrophe....Talk about the country being destroyed includes visions of slam-bang movie endings....But this is not what happens when real countries are destroyed. It is the imagery of movies, melodrama, television.”<sup>78</sup> The poignant observations in this article precede Rozario’s similar conclusions decades later in 2007. The writer identifies the growing relationship between catastrophe and cinema, but ultimately concludes that the “[d]estruction of a country is probably unspectacular in most stages. Most of the events that later were seen, cumulatively, to have bene the fall of Rome would have made very dull movies.”<sup>79</sup>

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76. “Catastrophe Seen as End to Atheism: Msgr. Sheen Says Impending Chaos will Cause Mankind to Turn to Morality,” *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1948.

77. “Evangelist Warns of Catastrophe,” *New York Times*, Jan. 3, 1951.

78. Russell Baker, “Fad in Catastrophe,” *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1971.

79. Russell Baker, “Fad in Catastrophe,” *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1971.

In 1982, the focus of the United States turned back to the world stage, specifically, the Soviet Union. One article reported that the Reagan's struggle against the Soviet Union would "only end in catastrophe."<sup>80</sup> In 1999, AIDS was reported as the "Worsening Catastrophe" in the developing world. This was catastrophic for both parents and children as life expectancy dropped, children were orphaned, and economic development was hindered by a shrinking working class.<sup>81</sup>

In the 2000s, a series of catastrophes at home reminded the American public of their own vulnerability. In 2005, an article reported that "'The Hurricane Katrina Tour—America's Worst Catastrophe' is scheduled to begin Jan. 4....Mr. Hoffman said that he was aware that it may look as if he is trying to profit from the city's misery, but that he was simply trying to help rebuild his city's economy."<sup>82</sup> Unlike other amusement parks and movies that profited from the recreation of catastrophe, this tour utilized the wreckage of the catastrophe itself, revealing the uncomfortable truth that Americans were, in fact, already touring the ruins and were willing to pay to do so. In 2012, the catastrophe of Hurricane Sandy was compared to another deadly snowstorm that hit New York in 2010. In 2012, officials "predicted a catastrophe...[and] issued strong warnings for what turned out to be a dire storm."<sup>83</sup> This article noted that "the second

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80. John F. Burns, "Soviet Says Crusade by Reagan May Risk Global Catastrophe," *New York Times*, June 10, 1982.

81. "AIDS, the Worsening Catastrophe," *New York Times*, Dec. 5, 1999.

82. Dave Caldwell, "New Orleans Company Plans a Tour of the Catastrophe," *New York Times*, Dec. 25, 2005.

83. "Prepared for Sandy," *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2012.

and harder part [is] bringing it all back to normal.”<sup>84</sup> This response indicates one of the greatest challenges with catastrophe: sometimes, catastrophe delivers destruction that allows for creative reconstruction, but sometimes, those under the heavy hand of a catastrophe want nothing more than their lives to return to normality.

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84. “Prepared for Sandy,” *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2012.



## CONCLUSIONS

The denotation of catastrophe, once used to refer to the closing act of a drama, adopted increasingly negative connotations and is now being used to describe sudden disasters. It is often used synonymously with words such as “disaster,” “crisis,” and “calamity,” and it is often used in conjunction with adjectives such as “fatal” and “tragic.” Many have identified and commented upon humanity’s preoccupation with catastrophe, but others are content to write and publish sensational reports of horrible events, create reenactments, and profit off of this seeming obsession with catastrophe.

While it is unlikely that any one event precipitated this change in denotation, several events—increased travel, the emergence of “denouement” in English, and the growing popularity of newspapers—allowed this shift to occur rapidly and without difficulty. The articles from the *London Times* and the *New York Times* show that “catastrophe” is not always used to refer to fatal events, but the Italian ban of “catastrophe” shows that it is, indeed, a powerful word that invokes strong emotions. Modern day evangelists follow in the footsteps of Increase Mather and view catastrophes as a call for repentance. Catastrophes occur at home and abroad, and newspapers like the *London Times* and the *New York Times* that have a global focus use the word to refer to horrible events regardless of location. Just as important as reporting catastrophes, however, seems to be the reporting of averted catastrophes. In either case, “catastrophe” in the modern sense has become a very real part of British or American life.

Avenues for further research include studying ancient Greek uses of “catastrophe” with regard to both connotation and denotation. Another possible area for research is researching the kinds of articles that use “catastrophe,” whether sports, local news, global news, or other articles. One could investigate the use of catastrophe prior to 1748 and look at how, more specifically, the word functioned when part of literature about or in dramas. All of these would work to establish a little more clearly the precise role that “catastrophe” plays in creating and developing the national consciousness.

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## APPENDIX A: OFF-CAMPUS PRESENTATION

This paper was presented in Session H1, Representations and Receptions, at the Social Science History Association Conference on November 14, 2015. The abstract submitted to the conference is identical to the abstract submitted in this thesis. The conference program can be found at the following address:

[https://www.ciser.cornell.edu/SSHA/SSHA\\_program\\_2015.pdf](https://www.ciser.cornell.edu/SSHA/SSHA_program_2015.pdf)