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**Microreading: Analysis of the "Personal Apocalypse" in *The Cage of Sand***

In J.G. Ballard's *The Cage of Sand* (1962), the three central characters—Bridgman, Travis, and Louise—are trapped in a post-apocalyptic beach town of Cape Canaveral while they are being hunted by the seemingly nefarious "wardens". However, as the story unfolds, the readers realize that the dystopia does not encompass the rest of the world, but rather is localized to Cape Canaveral. Furthermore, the wardens are not a legitimate threat; they only want to quarantine the characters temporarily to prevent dangerous viruses found in the beach sand from spreading. Thus, the characters' fear of the wardens is deluded and their entrapment at the beach is self-imposed. Instead of exploring apocalypse on a global scale, Ballard examines the idea of a personal apocalypse, which is when a crisis in an individual's life mentally entraps them in the past.

In Ballard's story, the characters are each experiencing their apocalypse because they are unable to let go of their past failures or loss that plagues them mentally. The main protagonist, Bridgman, carries his failures as an architect who designed a Martian settlement that was never constructed (344). Bridgman likes to remind himself of his unattained dream by "immolating himself" in his darkened suite where he surrounds himself with drawings of his unbuilt Martian city and other "fragments of a vanished and unregretted past" (341). The strong use of the word "immolating", which refers to a painful way to sacrifice or kill oneself, implies that Bridgman's routine in reminding himself of his past failure is an extreme form of

self-punishment. Like Bridgman, Travis is burdened by his failure to attain his aspirations. Travis was supposed to be an astronaut but backed out due to his nerves. Due to his "inability to come terms with this failure of character", Travis now maintains the same haircut and physical shape he had as when he was an astronaut in-training (343-344). Travis attempts to hold on to his past by preserving his former physical appearance. Lastly, Louise bears the memory of her dead astronaut husband, who died in a launch pad accident. Now, she spends each night watching her husband's ship orbit like a "mourning mariner's wife waiting for the sea to surrender her husband's body" (342). She is just as unlikely to get it back from the infinite space as the vast ocean, which indicates the futility of her actions. Thus, her commitment to waiting for her husband suggests an inability to move on from her past loss, just like how Bridgman and Travis are unable to let go of their past failures.

The apocalyptic setting of the cape further serves as a physical manifestation of the characters' mental entrapment. The squalor and "depressing" state of the abandoned beach resorts, whose arcades and bars Ballard likens to "trash" and "monster-side shows", mirrors the internal misery of the characters as they are repeatedly reminded of their past pains (341). The motifs of physical entrapment—from the wardens hunting the characters (345) to the construction of the wall around the virus-infested beach (349)—reflect how the characters are mentally stuck in their past. For example, Travis laments how the wardens are using the wall to "quietly sea[l] off the past, Louise and I and you with it" (349). One can interpret the wall in Travis's proclamation as both a physical barrier—that prevents the protagonists' departure from the beach— and a mental barrier—that prevents their advancement from past grievances. Overall, the physical setting mimics the characters' anguish and mental stagnation.

At first, the apocalyptic descriptions of the setting provide legitimate reasons why the protagonists stay at Cape Canaveral. When Ballard takes apart those reasons, he begins to portray the characters' confinement as self-imposed and bordering delusional. One such instance is when Ballard reveals that the apocalyptic conditions are localized only to Cape Canaveral and any of the characters are allowed to return to society if they submit to one year of quarantine (352). The characters' evasion from the wardens is rendered irrational because they are essentially avoiding the opportunity to rejoin civilized society and its comforts. Even the title of the story, *Cage of Sand*, implies the physical mode of entrapment is not a legitimate threat but is rather something that can be overcome easily like a cage made of sand. It is their choice to be stuck in an abandoned deteriorating beach town. The delusional state of the characters becomes even more apparent near the end of the story as their actions reflect literal madness. For instance, while Travis "thrash[es]" and acts like a "wild dog" when the wardens capture him, Bridgman purposefully drives his forearm against Merrill's capsule, burning his arm to "bond him to the spirit of the dead astronaut" (358). All the while Louise, who is convinced that Merrill's falling ship is her husband's ship, chases the ship into the ocean with "inconsolable anguish in her face" (356). Overall, the self-imposed exile shows how Bridgman, Travis, and Louise choose to inflict pain on to themselves through constant recalling of their devastations rather than electing to move on from their pasts.

However, Ballard hints that Bridgman, Travis, and Louise's attachment to the Cape is not entirely unreasonable because it stems from desperation to hold onto something familiar in times of devastation and uncertainty. For example, Bridgman "drifted aimlessly" (344) and Louise "lived a nomadic existence, driving restlessly" (343) after their losses. Their lack of

stability demonstrates how individuals often are lost and confused following a drastic change in their lives. These individuals become desperate to find some meaning to tether themselves too. All three characters come to the cape because it holds reminders of their pasts. For Bridgman, it is the Martian beach sand that reminds him of his hypothetical Martian city and his "unattained ambitions" (357). For Travis, Cape Canaveral is the "abandoned Mecca of the first heroes of astronautics" (343) and serves as a tie to his astronaut brethren. For Louise, the Cape provides an unobstructed view of her husband's orbit. Not only can she remain connected to him, but she can recall her younger days when her husband's fame allowed her to be "courted" by the media (343). For the trio, Cape Canaveral gives them a sense of purpose, even if that purpose is to fixate on failed aspirations or grief in an unhealthy manner. As Bridgman puts it, the idea of Cape Canaveral "provided a power compass" for him during his time of aimless drifting (344). Ballard demonstrates how individuals experiencing a personal apocalypse can mentally entrap themselves in their past pain because the familiarity of it provides comfort during a time of confusion and uncertainty.

Overall, the apocalyptic atmosphere of Cape Canaveral mirrors the anguish of the characters as they constantly remind themselves of their past failures and losses. However, the localized scale of the apocalypse and the lack of legitimate danger the characters face indicate that Bridgman, Travis, and Louise are not held hostage by force, but rather are *choosing* to stay secluded at the beach. In doing so, they are also mentally entrapping themselves in their painful pasts, becoming more delusional the longer they hold on to them. Ballard does, however, acknowledge how the uncertainty that follows drastic changes in someone's life may push him to hold on to his past out of desperation for something familiar.

Essentially, Ballard uses the bleak and deserted setting found in typical post-apocalyptic SF narratives to show how a personal apocalypse can just as likely impede an individual's ability to grow and lead a fulfilling life as a global apocalypse.

**Works Cited**

Ballard, J.G. "The Cage of Sand" (1962). *The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction*. Ed. Arthur B. Evans, et al. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2019. 337-358.