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The Reality of Utopian and Dystopian Fiction: Thomas More's Utopia and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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THE REALITY OF UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN FICTION: THOMAS MORE'S
UTOPIA AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

By
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT

CASEY AARON HOLLIDAY: The Reality of Utopian and Dystopian Fiction: Thomas More's *Utopia* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*
(Under the direction of Leigh Anne Duck)

The purpose of this research is to explore the different methods that Thomas More's *Utopia* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* utilize to create a compliant population, while also situating each in their appropriate historical context to draw on the authorial intentions. Different commonalities of the various definitions of utopia and dystopia are explored to form a framework to work within, and the two works are analyzed in relation to political theories set forth by Michel Foucault: the power over life and death in *Utopia* and the deployment of sexuality in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both are used to enforce subjugation, and an analysis of those methods will show that both of the governments in these two works have a strong basis in their respective authors' time period.

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Introduction

To minimize suffering and to maximize security were natural and proper ends of society and Caesar. But then they became the only ends, somehow, and the only basis of law—a perversion. Inevitably, then, in seeking only them, we found only their opposites: maximum suffering and minimum security” — Walter M. Miller Jr., A Canticle for Leibowitz

When *The Hunger Games* opened in United States theaters on March 23, 2012, it set the record for third-highest weekend opening of all time with a gross of \$152.5 million. For a world left waiting for the next big obsession after Harry Potter, Suzanne Collins’ book trilogy reignited the young adult fiction genre and paved the way for the series to become one of the most popular and successful, both financially and critically, franchises of all time. Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy is the latest young adult dystopian novel to spawn a theatrical adaptation, and with opening weekend grosses of \$55 million, it will not be the last.

What do the two series have in common, other than their emphasis on strong female central roles? They are both categorized as dystopias, a classification that, while not new to the literary world or even the young adult genre, has attained an unprecedented level of popularity in modern times. Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* (2005), Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* (1993), and William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) are all young adult dystopian novels that have seen a recent surge in popularity (not to say that they were not popular in their own right: *Lord of the Flies*’ dependable presence in high school English classes across America is a testament to that).

Dystopias are not just for kids, either, and have long been a staple of adult fiction. Philip K. Dick’s *Minority Report* (1956), Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Anthony

Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Stephen King's *The Long Walk* (1979) and *The Running Man* (1982), and more recently Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) all feature dystopias for readers who prefer a little more cynicism. Dystopian fiction is often described as science fiction, but just as not all science fiction is dystopian, not all dystopias are science fiction. They are not confined to the literary genre, either; dystopias have become popular story lines for television shows (adult serial drama *Fringe* and children's animated series *Adventure Time*), video games (underwater dystopia *Bioshock* and capitalism-run-amok *Final Fantasy VII*), and even music (two of Pink Floyd's albums, *Animals* and *The Wall*, contain dystopian themes). The continuing rise of the dystopia in popular culture and contemporary thought makes a companion genre's absence particularly noticeable: where are all of the utopias?

Thomas More kick started utopian literature in 1516 with *Utopia*, which formally gave a name to the genre that now included previously published works like Saint Augustine's *The City of God* and the Bible's Revelation. The word "utopia" descended from a Greek word meaning "no place," and today is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "an imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect, especially in respect of social structure, laws, and politics."¹ Utopian literature flourished during the period of colonization, with some attempting real world applications in unsettled lands. Colonization created interesting new opportunities for the utopia across all disciplines, and many writers saw expansion as a way to test utopian features on a new population. Within the last century, however, the balance has shifted, marking a change from "how good could it be?" to "how bad could it become?" What had previously been a field populated with imaginative and innovative new

¹ "Utopia, n.," *Oxford English Dictionary*.

societies grew dry, replaced with the foreboding and totalitarian regimes of most dystopias.

Utopian literature, by its nature, focuses the narrative on a detailed description of the society and its laws, culture, political and economic systems, and other aspects, rather than on an action-driven plot. There is normally little, if any, conflict in utopian novels (if everything is perfect, there is no need for dissension), and the utopia serves as representation of the apex of human progress and achievement. William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890) and H.G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (1905) are two examples where the plot functions not on conflict, but on a third party's visit to and subsequent understanding of a utopia, usually with comparisons to the society they came from.

While there may be some description of the dystopian society and the foundation that led to its inception, unlike in utopian novels, greater political theory does not serve as the driving force of the plot. Dystopian literature typically follows a character as he or she navigates the dystopia, giving insight into the society without having the society's motivations or purposes explicitly stated. These characters' motivation is almost always to find an escape route, such as Jonah's literal escape from the city in *The Giver* or Winston Smith's figurative escape through death in *1984*. The desire to leave society behind and forge a new, uncertain path is an inherent thread in all dystopian fiction, ultimately resulting in success, showing cracks in the authoritative control, or failure, preserving the dystopia against its dissidents.

Why, then, has the utopian promise of a better life been overshadowed by the theoretically dystopian consequences of such an attempt? In this age of postmodernism, we have become overly critical and wary of any attempt to offer the government more

control over our daily lives, which is what a utopia would have to do to be successful. In the last century, the decrease in publication of utopian literature could be attributed to the rise in failed utopian states like Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, or the integration of utopian ideals into oppressive states, such as China and North Korea. These unsuccessful attempts at creating a utopia have left us scared of change, resistant to any alterations to our now perfect capitalist democracy (or so we believe). As Gregory Vieira says, “In this era of anti-ideology it appears that nothing is more offensive than the desire to make ideology concrete in an utopian vision.”²

There is probably a social critique in the fact that we are now more obsessed with how we can ruin society than fix it, but this writing is less about popular culture and its problems and more about the historical legacy—if any—of utopian and dystopian fiction. All branches of utopian research can be traced back to the literary utopias, and it is only from these that we can capture the human spirit of progress and, in many cases, contain real world elements that highlight the author’s critique on the society he or she lived in. Dystopias, on the other hand, attempt to show how easily society can stray from the democratic path, and, in most cases, serve as a warning for the direction that the nation is heading. When looked at together, they become a societal example of cause and effect: utopias exist as a goal to work towards, with the dystopia waiting in the shadows, ready to take its place when the utopia (perhaps inevitably) fails.

To analyze the former, I have chosen Thomas More’s *Utopia*, published in 1516 and the quintessential work of the utopian genre. More’s detailed descriptions of Utopia’s laws, customs, economics, politics, and every other facet of the culture allow us to form a

² Gregory Vieira, “No Place for Utopia: Postmodern Theory and The White Hotel,” *Utopian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1993): 117.

complete utopian framework, with every revelation, contradiction, and paradox intact. Most importantly, its numerous allusions to and direct comparisons with early sixteenth century European culture encourage an historicist approach, looking for areas that show More's critique of societal norms, governmental policy, complicated legal codes, colonization, and other aspects. At the same time, *Utopia* is a work of fiction, and it is important to separate what More believed was achievable social change and what are fantastic aspirations. Could More's work be used as commentary on the problems, and possible fixes, of 1500s society, or does he just use it as a basis with which to build his own, unique world, a pipe-dream not to be replicated, but to envy?

On the other end of the spectrum is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985. Her dystopia takes place in the Republic of Gilead, a land ruled by an extreme right Christian theocracy after an overthrow of the American government. *The Handmaid's Tale* not only serves as a textbook example of all of dystopian fictions' methods, but also contains a particularly pertinent message, perhaps even more so now than when it was originally written. The Christianization of modern American politics has increased throughout the years, and a tide that was originally resistant to it is beginning to show signs of weakening. How, then, is Atwood's tale a sign of where we are going? Does she offer an escape route, or are we subject to destiny? Or, just as in the case with More, is this all a false alarm, and Atwood is positing a future that is improbable or, even worse, impossible?

Though a thorough comparison of the two will not be made, there are multiple reasons why the novels work well together for an analysis of the utopia and dystopia. Both were written during their genres' popular phase, and both contain aspects that can

be applied to the world the writers live in. *Utopia* places the optimism of world expansion that pervaded the 1500s front and center, while *The Handmaid's Tale* captures the cynicism and political strife that has penetrated contemporary America. They both function as examples of the height of their genres, offering the same analysis—albeit, through different methods—of their societies. Though different on every level down to the plot structure, *Utopia* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are compatible because of those exact differences; they allow us to view their societies through a lens that provides context and direction and contain enough of their genres' conventions to be examined and situated in the literary world and in history.

First, though, we must start at the beginning: what do the words 'utopia' and 'dystopia' even mean? The answer is a bit more complicated than one might think.

Chapter 1: Defining Utopia and Dystopia

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias.” – Oscar Wilde, The Soul of Man under Socialism

Introduction

The word “utopia” takes multiple meanings, and, depending on the discipline, could define many different contexts. The theory of utopia has changed drastically in recent times, as philosophers and social scientists moved away from the dreamy and unattainable goals of early utopias, like the elimination of jealousy and disease, and towards more practical utopian ideals, such as equal distribution of wealth and resources. This shift also changed the focus of research on utopia as philosophical concept, moving from attempting to create an actual utopian state to integrating particular utopian ideas into modern political thought. Entire studies have been dedicated to an attempt to pin down an exact and all-encompassing definition of utopia, but rather than try to do the same here, the different commonalities of utopias will be discussed to create not a definition, but a framework through which to analyze Thomas More’s *Utopia*.

Utopia

Utopian theory constitutes many different disciplines, from literary criticism to socio-political theory. Lisa Garforth, in her article “No Intentions? Utopian Theory After the Future,” defines three distinct fields in utopian research: “utopian (and dystopian)

fiction, social and political theory and philosophy, and practical utopian experiments.”³

Thomas More invented the word, and subsequently the literary genre, with the publication of his famous and polarizing work *Utopia* in 1516. With *Utopia* and the writings that followed came the idea of a literary utopia that borrowed elements from economic and political systems to construct something new and “definitionally impossible to instantiate.”⁴ Stemming from this and socio-political theory are the “practical utopian experiments,” like that of the Marquis de Rays’s fantastically failed attempt to create a utopian society in Papua New Guinea.⁵

That is not to say that without More, literature could not be characterized as utopian; almost two millennia before him, Plato’s *The Republic* attempted to articulate a perfect society through a series of drastic and unachievable goals. Rather, More’s invention of the word finally gave a name to the genre and began a heavy examination and analysis of a utopia, allowing it to branch out of literature and into politics, religion, popular culture, and every field of research. The publication of *Utopia* established a genre for *The Republic* to be placed in; the latter is often described as the first real utopian work, a designation that would be impossible without More. The use of works to redefine those that came before is not new; Jorge Luis Borges proposed it in the early 1900s in “Kafka and His Precursors”:

“If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have enumerated resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. The second fact is more significant. In each of these texts we find Kafka’s idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist. The poem ‘Fears and

³ Lisa Garforth, “No Intentions? Utopian Theory After the Future,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 13, no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ Bill Metcalf, “Utopian Fraud: The Marquis de Rays and La Nouvelle-France,” *Utopian Studies* 11, no. 1 (March 2011): 104-124.

Scruples' by Browning foretells Kafka's work, but our reading of Kafka perceptibly sharpens and deflects our reading of the poem. Browning did not read it as we do now. In the critics' vocabulary, the word 'precursor' is indispensable, but it should be cleansed of all connotation of polemics or rivalry. The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future."⁶

In this way, not only does *Utopia* color the way we read *The Republic*, but *Utopia* also colored everything that came after it. The goal here is not to glorify More or create a pedestal to place him on, but to show his importance in the formation of the genre. Many of the ideas that were featured in *Utopia* would become staples of utopian fiction to follow, beginning with the word itself.

To begin, the etymology of the word itself is important to its meaning. More's spelling of the word directly translates from Greek as "no place," perhaps either a slight hint at More's lack of belief in the real world application of his utopian society or just a joke at the characters' inability to find the island on a map. A slight spelling change to "eutopia," however, translates as "good place," creating a different vision of the utopia. Rather than resting on the impracticalness of its application, it highlights the goal of any true utopia: to form a new and better society than the one that exists.

Although utopian and dystopian fiction is the primary area of discussion here, the genre has been heavily influenced by research from other disciplines, becoming particularly intertwined with political and economic theories. Utopian ideals are often confused, or even used as synonyms, with the ideals of communal economic systems like socialism and communism, and even anarchists are starting to equate themselves with utopian philosophy. All three of these systems contain features that were incorporated into Thomas More's *Utopia* and are common to other utopias, but none possess all of the

⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1988).

qualities for a successful utopian state; hence, while utopian theory borrows from political and economic theory, it remains its own distinct branch. In order to establish a rough sketch of the elements of a utopia, common factors that are present in the majority of utopias will be explored.

Utopias are typically classified as socialist due to the standard utopia's elimination of private property, but socialists fight this distinction, and one researcher found an "all but unanimous rejection of the utopian label by socialists themselves."⁷ Both contain the promise of an improvement of the current social order, but socialism exists as a direct result of capitalism, while utopian ideals existed long before capitalism became a viable economic system. Also, socialism generally only deals with the economic and political sectors, with cultural and social aspects defined based upon the success of the former. For a utopia to succeed, though, all four facets must have equal attention to ensure that they meld to best suit the utopia.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, authors of *The Communist Manifesto*, took particular offense at having their economic system compared to utopias. Engels argued that utopianism promotes immediate action, a swift overthrow of the status quo and implementation of a new and carefully planned out replacement. Socialists, on the other hand, understood the importance of waiting for the opportune moment for all the pieces to fall into place, and even then there would not be a concrete plan of action. To Marx and Engels, this was one of the key differences between the two: "Engels suggests that it is their reluctance to provide such detail which makes it inappropriate to attach the

⁷ David Leopold, "Socialism and (the Rejection of) Utopia," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12, no. 3 (Oct. 2007): 219.

utopian label to their own work.”⁸ Utopias, they said, are attempting to predict the future by creating set parameters, only under which they can be created; socialism avoided this through hinging its success on taking shape organically, allowing it to change and form with the social and political constructs of the time.

Twentieth-century anarchist ideology borrows heavily from utopian themes, furthered primarily through the work of anarchist writers Paul Goodman and Colin Ward. Many of the ideas present in utopian literature overlapped with the two’s goals, and they adapted these ideas into their writings, pushing utopianism and anarchism closer together. While anarchism borrows themes from utopianism, the two are barely comparable; anarchism fights against government control in any way, shape, or form, and utopianism almost always requires the government or some sort of ruling body to create and maintain the society.

Anarchists were particularly attracted to utopianism’s emphasis on the present, and, Carissa Honeywell writes, the common idea of prefiguration, or “a strong continuity between action and planning in the present and the goals for the future towards which they are directed.”⁹ This emphasis led to tension between schools of thought in both anarchism and Marxism. The former argues that humans are ready to take the step towards dismantling governmental control, but are held back by reliance on programs and general apathy; the latter argues that the former’s approach results in “reactionary indefiniteness” without ever achieving any real social goals.¹⁰ Marx and Engels were particularly critical of anarchism’s principle of contingency, meaning that for a utopian

⁸ Ibid., 232.

⁹ Carissa Honeywell, “Utopianism and Anarchism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12, no. 3 (Oct. 2007): 242.

¹⁰ Ibid., 244.

society to develop, social change must be willed by the population in the present; this directly contradicted their own philosophy of historical determinism, which stated that social and political events have been historically predetermined. Both systems, however, hinge their success upon immanence; to succeed, the population must have faith in a new power without the power necessarily justifying the support.¹¹ It is not important to distinguish whether one system resembles a utopia's economy more than the other, but it is helpful to realize that fictional utopias can, and often do, contain all of the elements mentioned above; while utopian ideals are separate from the tenets of communism and anarchism, aspects of each are easily visible in almost any literary utopian society.

What is the point of even attempting to create a utopian society? In literary terms, a utopia functions as a working example of the society the author is trying to create, and takes any shape or form that the author directs. Utopianism, according to Ernst Bloch, is “fundamental to human consciousness because humans are always striving forward, anticipating, desiring.”¹² Utopianism, then, is the feeling of a utopia, something for humans to work towards in creating a better future. If successful, the end result is society's transformation into a true utopia, but real world attempts, such as Soviet Russia, reveal that utopianism does not always translate into tangible results. Utopianism, much like a utopia, is an ideal; for utopianism to be effective, all members of a population must subscribe in the hopes of advancing the community, but history has shown this rarely happens. Still, utopianism is an important facet of utopian studies, as it would have to be the driving force behind a literal utopia's creation and success, while also serving as the glue that holds society together—if it can overcome human nature.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bill Ashcroft, “The Ambiguous Necessity of Utopia: Post-Colonial Literatures and the Persistence of Hope,” *Social Alternatives* 28, no. 3 (2009): 9.

A good place to begin with utopian research is a broad definition used across disciplines. Marianna Papastephanou defines utopia as “a literary genre of concrete oneiric pictures of the good life.”¹³ She goes a step farther and categorizes this utopia as spatial, separating the literal place and the abstract idea. Her utopia is extremely general; she is more interested in relating ideas of utopia to issues in education than in performing a literary analysis. Any environment better than the current one would be a utopia here, not just those that have achieved societal perfection.

Avoiding a slant toward one discipline over another, Gregory Claeys strikes at the heart of what a utopia is so that it can be applied to both the literary and political theory genres. Claeys writes that the utopia is centered upon the idea of “enhanced sociability, or more communal form of living, sometimes associated with ideals of friendship.”¹⁴ In short, happiness rests in the elimination of private property and in the creation of a community support system. This community support system is what keeps the population complacent, teaching them to work for their neighbors and friends instead of themselves. As we will see in the discussion of Thomas More’s *Utopia*, creating this complacency takes years of work, but, as we will see in the discussion of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, destroying it takes much less time.

Dystopia

With so much attention focused solely on defining utopia, one would think the same amount has been focused on its counterpart, the dystopia. Surprisingly, little research on dystopias exists. Most research on dystopia focuses squarely in the literary

¹³ Marianna Papastephanou, “Dystopian Reality, Utopian Thought and Educational Practice,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 27, no. 2-3 (April 2008): 92.

¹⁴ Gregory Claeys, “News from Somewhere: Enhanced Sociability and the Composite Definition of Utopia and Dystopia,” *History* 98, no. 330 (April 2013): 145.

field; political theory looks at dystopic elements in non-dystopic nations and the only “practical dystopia experiments” are ones that failed their original purpose. The general definition of dystopia from the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible.”¹⁵ Lyman Sargent defined it as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerable worse than the society in which that reader lived.”¹⁶ This definition fits well with the framework with which *The Handmaid’s Tale* will be analyzed, and due to the low volume of research and general agreement among academics, this is the “dystopia” that the paper will be referring to.

Definition in hand, there are a few other important aspects of the dystopia. All dystopias are about control, featuring a government that consists of some sort of dictatorship, form of totalitarianism, or other kind of complete supervision over the population. Sometimes, dystopias hide behind the guise of a utopia, blurring the lines between the two: the dystopia in Lowry’s *The Giver* is only revealed once Jonas is able to see past the façade that conceals the society’s secrets. Unlike utopian novels, dystopian novels are centered in the agon, or conflict, to provide their message; the agon provides the vehicle for the narrator to make his or her case against the society by showing how he or she functions within it.¹⁷ Gorman Beauchamp pinpoints the most important element of the agon in dystopian works, the moment “in which the rebellious protagonist confronts

¹⁵ “Dystopia, n.,” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁶ Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (June 1994): 9.

¹⁷ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 51.

the apologist for the evil regime.”¹⁸ Generally used as the climax, this moment gives the antagonists a chance to explain their motives or defend the dystopia, providing an insight into the views and ideologies of supporters.

Dystopian novels generally end in one of two ways. The protagonist will sometimes escape from the society, to find a new home or to help topple the government. Other times, the dystopia succeeds in defeating the protagonist, either through death or reassimilation into society and collective thought. Regardless of the conclusion, both paths show the one theme included in every dystopian work: hope. Hope drives the plot in almost every dystopian work, giving the protagonist a reason to chase the unimaginable ‘better.’ The elimination of hope is every dystopia’s goal, as the crushing of hope prevents uprisings. It is always emotion that results in the downfall of a dystopia, one of the reasons many dystopias repress love and sexual desire—they breed hope.

Key Terms

Two terms that will be important in the analysis of utopias and dystopias are historicism and ahistoricism. Historicism applies a very specific context to a work, and detailed interpretations of the work will reveal striking real world parallels.¹⁹ This is typically used when an author wants a work to be analyzed in the context of a specific worldview or time, allowing it to function as a criticism or companion to that context. Ahistoricism is not concerned with being placed in a context, and exists outside of any historical developments or history that may have occurred. Utopias are always classified as one or the other; due to its heavy and obvious allusions to Europe at the time, More’s

¹⁸ Gorman Beauchamp, “The Politics of *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Midwest Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2009): 11.

¹⁹ Constance Furey, “Utopian History,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (2008): 387.

Utopia is placed squarely in historicism, which greatly changes the significance of the work and how it should be interpreted. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* features aspects of both: some of the cultural themes present in Gilead make it apparent that this future is rooted in our present, but past these abstract connections, nothing of the history—or, at least, the history we are given—is planted in humanity's timeline. Applying this framework to More and Atwood will reveal more of their intentions, as well as improving the connection each work has with its era.

Another important idea is that of bio-power, or “what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.”²⁰ Michel Foucault developed a theory that, before the rise of capitalism, empires exerted their control over the population through a power of life and death, but “only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing.”²¹ Most of the monarchies of Renaissance Europe, including More's England, functioned more or less along these lines; More tragically learned firsthand how much power the king has over his life. Foucault defines bio-power as “the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes [that must be sustained through] methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern.”²²

Bio-power is an essential piece of a successful utopia, yet remains elusive; forcing the population into the machine is easy, but sustaining the machine's successful

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 141.

²¹ Ibid., 136.

²² Ibid., 140-141.

production continues to be the downfall of modern utopian states. *Utopia* and *The Handmaid's Tale* focus on different aspects of this puzzle, helping to explain the immanence of their respective governments. The cultural and religious beliefs of the Utopians serve solely to produce a complacent population, sustaining the community and the happiness of everyone in it; the events of *The Handmaid's Tale*, on the other hand, show just how hard creating this complacency can be. Both societies, though, thrive on control; the subjugation of dissenters in *Utopia* and of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* enforces a commonality between utopias and dystopias: for either to exist, freedom as we know it cannot.

Chapter 2: Thomas More's *Utopia*

*Noplacia was once my name,
That is, a place where no one goes.
Plato's Republic now I claim
To match, or beat at its own game;
For that was just a myth in prose,
But what he wrote of, I became,
Of men, wealth, laws a solid frame,
A place where every wise man goes:
Goplacia is now my name.²³*

Introduction

The latter end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century was a period of massive change across Europe. Christopher Columbus's encounter with the Americas spurred dreams of colonization across Europe; Spain worked to achieve religious purity by forcing to convert or expelling the country's Jewish and Muslim populations; the Roman Catholic Church began to lose its grip on power, starting with Martin Luther touching off the Protestant Reformation and followed by Henry VIII establishing and heading a newly-independent Church of England during the English Reformation; and, due to rapid overexpansion, the continent's empires began to splinter, framing an age of constant war. The rollercoaster rise and fall of vast countries and shifts in power made the period optimal for experimenting in political theory—beginning with the one and only Sir Thomas More.

Born in London in 1478, Thomas More began the political side of his legacy when he was just twelve as a page for John Morton, Lord Chancellor of England. After

²³ Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 5.

graduating from Oxford University and studying law, More took up an interest in Latin and Greek, particularly translating into the language. Modern Latin became increasingly popular for 16th century writers, and any works of religious, scientific, philosophical, or cultural significance were published in Latin, harkening back to the days of classical Latin writers²⁴; *Utopia* would be written and published in Latin, possibly in an attempt to have its ideas taken seriously. His political ascension started with his appointment as MP of London (representing his county in Parliament) and, soon after, he was selected to participate in treaty negotiations with the Netherlands. The trip brought him to Belgium, where *Utopia* and some of its characters began to form, and *Utopia* was published a little over a year later in 1516. A series of other political trips led to his election as Speaker of the House of Commons, as well as several controversial decisions that would culminate in his execution.²⁵

When King Henry VIII began his dispute with Martin Luther, More made a very public display of support with *Responsio ad Lutherum*, defending the church and attacking Luther. He resisted the Protestant Reformation in general, persecuting Protestants and suppressing country ministers who spoke from the William Tyndale translation of the New Testament. More's loyalty to King Henry VIII was rewarded by his appointment as Lord Chancellor of England in 1529, but rumors that he had tortured Protestant prisoners still followed him. More resigned from the position in 1531 when Henry VIII declared himself head of the new state church; when More refused to recite

²⁴ George E. Duckworth, *Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia*, "Latin Language," 2009.
²⁵ More, vii-viii.

an oath recognizing the legitimacy of Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn, he is tried and beheaded in a public execution.²⁶

More had a significant hand in affecting the political and religious climate in England during King Henry VIII's reign, and it is from his position that he would develop many of the ideas presented in *Utopia*. His attempt to create a perfect society that eliminated class distinctions and encouraged communal living contradicted both his public allegiance with King Henry VIII and many of the reforms he advocated in England; important to remember, however, is that Thomas More was an accomplished philosopher in political and domestic spheres, and *Utopia* could have been his way to publish his personal oppositions to policies or laws without being branded disloyal or a traitor. Using this brief sketch of Thomas More's life, *Utopia* will be examined as both a literary work and a political philosophy, particularly in how to achieve a population's complacency and acceptance.

***Utopia*: An Overview**

Even at the present day, debate exists among critics over whether *Utopia* constitutes an overt satire, a political critique, a Catholic defense, or a description of real societal aspirations. Literary critics and political philosophers both claim More's society for their own, and the work has transcended genres since its publication to function as more than just a literary work.

Regardless of how one classifies *Utopia*'s genre, the text functions first and foremost as a work of literature; an attempt to analyze it otherwise ignores the rhetorical devices inherent to a full understanding of More's intentions. For example, the letter to friend Peter Gilles that More uses as the beginning of *Utopia* must be examined as either

²⁶ Ibid.

truth (his true opinions and intentions about how the work should be received) or fiction (the letter serving as just another narrative device). Leading up to the publication of *Utopia*, More, along with Erasmus, was engaged in translating the writings of Greek author Lucian into Latin. This was a particularly influential time for More, as it was through Lucian that More would pick up many of his later techniques, particularly the idea of Socratic irony. Thomas More scholar Stephen W. Smith points out this is because of its “power to prick and challenge the idle reader ... and to draw the murmuring soul into dialectical inquiry, an act requiring the reader’s active participation—and vulnerability—as he carefully weighs and sifts opposing view in the arduous pursuit of truth.”²⁷ More employs this method throughout *Utopia*, and Raphael often offers sarcastic and ironic remarks on Utopian policies that insinuate the text’s satirical nature.

Separating the satirical tone from ideas that should be taken as is can be a difficult process. The work is not supposed to be a nonfiction account of Utopia’s discovery, but rather a revelation of England’s contradictory laws and beliefs through applying the same laws and beliefs to Utopia. As Smith also notes, neglecting to notice such irony can lead to “misinterpretation and error ... of what we read and accidently increas[e] our ignorance, rather than moving [us] toward truth.”²⁸ By using irony in *Utopia*, More hides the ‘truth’ under a layer of satire, and to truly explicate More’s ultimate meaning, the reader must see through More’s literary games. Satire is not the only layer, however; much of the ‘truth’ of *Utopia* is hidden underneath multiple layers that must be peeled back to understand how each part of *Utopia* functions in relation to the whole. Still,

²⁷ Stephen W. Smith, “Literary Designs: Thomas More’s *Utopia* as Literature,” *Thomas More Studies* 1 (2006): 39.

²⁸ Ibid, 40.

though, More writes *Utopia* as if it is supposed to be read as a nonfiction account, further complicating his message and confusing readers for the last five centuries.

As More's authorial intentions are pertinent to understanding the relationship *Utopia* had to then-contemporary European culture, multiple angles of issues must be analyzed to draw out More's most likely meaning. *Utopia*, and by extension More, has been interpreted to support or refute numerous political, religious, and social ideas; that one situation in *Utopia* could, at the same time, encourage or dissuade a particular idea demonstrates More's ambivalence towards having his work explicitly promote a single stance. On the other hand, More's extensive background in public service and politics necessitates a look at how these ideas mirror or contradict those in his political life. The greater message that More wished to disseminate is hidden behind these interpretation barriers, and uncovering the "true" meaning behind his words determines whether *Utopia* is a blueprint to fix society or a satire to parody many of the period's beliefs and conventions. A historicist analytical framework, defined by Derek Gregory as "critical traditions that insist on the importance of specific historical contexts to the interpretation of cultural texts and practices," proves useful here.²⁹ Most of *Utopia* has some connection with real-life people, places, or events, and investigating their role or function in the text elucidates More's motives.

Most of the laws and customs the Utopians follow are not original ideas; almost all of the Utopians' beliefs are small tweaks or complete contrasts with English society at the time. Because of more than coincidental parallels with English laws and customs, *Utopia* can be read as More's idea on how to recreate the corrupt English society into what, in his mind, is required to reach perfection. Historical context is important in

²⁹ Derek Gregory, "Historicism," *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (2009).

analyzing this, as oftentimes the contrast provides a critique on some part of 16th century English life, including not only politics and economics, but also on philosophy, prejudice, colonization, warfare, and various other topics. These beliefs contradict themselves frequently, however, muddling the true meaning behind what purpose the work is supposed to achieve; *Utopia* has been argued as supporting Catholicism, attacking organized religion, showing how communism can work, highlighting the dangers of communal property, and many other contradictions. Similarly, some of the progressive ideas that *Utopia* advocated (religious toleration, for example) were in direct opposition with More's public persona (his attempt to completely erase Protestantism from England). So what does More actually believe, and what is his intent with *Utopia*? Analyzing More in historical context hopefully provides an answer—as long as you are not led astray by the heavy satire that permeates the work.

Whether one views the text as satire or societal blueprint, More wants his island to be as believable as possible. To this purpose, he begins the volume with letters to and from a community of witnesses to the fantastic tale of Raphael, who—as the text will go on to recount—first voyaged to Utopia. The primary function of this metafictional device is to provide credibility for the purported conversations that ensue. In the first letter, More, playing himself, is explaining to his friend Peter Gilles why the manuscript took so long for him to complete and asking him to double check with Raphael, who—as the text progresses, and in the setting of Gilles's home in Antwerp-- tells More the story of Utopia. More ends with complaints against readers, lamenting the fact that “most readers know nothing about literature—many regard it with contempt.”³⁰ He practically highlights every kind of reader and critic, blasting them all for being too limited in scope

³⁰ Ibid, 9-10.

in the varieties of literature and too critical for things they do not like (foreshadowing the critical reception of *Utopia* upon publication). It is also here that More states how he would like the work to be interpreted, saying that all he is concerned with is being closest to the “truth, which in this case is all I’m worrying about.”³¹

Two of the people mentioned in this letter—Gilles and John Clement—are based on real people in More’s life. Gilles lived in Antwerp, where he was a town clerk; More would stay with him in July 1515 and begin work on *Utopia* the following September. That *Utopia* would be started soon after More’s visit and began with a letter to Gilles indicates some that the latter had sort of influence, either in the formation of More’s city or by just being a friend. (It could also be a thank you to Gilles, who introduced More to Desiderius Erasmus, one of the leading theologians of the time). The young assistant, John Clement, was also a real figure in More’s life: he served as a tutor to More’s children, later marrying one of the adopted daughters. The two men serve as real world anchors, an attempt to tell the reader that what follows is supposed to be read as a true story. Clement represents the critical reader, instilling doubt in More about the truthfulness of Raphael’s account; of all the things in *Utopia* to question, Clement argues the logic of how wide a bridge is, focusing on physical and measureable attributes that would place *Utopia* in context with Europe. Contrasted with this approach—interested but skeptical—is the overzealous bishop who appears later Book One, who immediately wants to go to *Utopia* to spread Christianity (even though a situation mentioned later shows it would not work). He stands for the readers who immediately believe or miss the point of the work, the same readers More shows disdain for.

³¹ More, 10.

Following this is another letter, this time from Gilles to Jerome Busleiden, who would later become counselor to Charles V. Busleiden was a frequent correspondent of More, having met him around the same time as Gilles. Busleiden's house and antique coin collection, which More greatly admired, became subjects of two of More's poems. Gilles's letter does little more than praise More for "the remarkable accuracy of his memory," "his cleverness in immediately grasping the actual and potential causes ... of every social evil," and "the force and fluency of his style."³² More is having fun here, the first example that the authenticity of *Utopia* is being overstated. On the other hand, Busleiden was an extremely wealthy, politically impressive, and very influential figure in More's day, and here, like Gilles and Clement, roots *Utopia* in an historical context and provides a sort of authority that the story is otherwise lacking.

Both letters also disguise a flaw in the plausibility of Utopia: the fact that seemingly only one person, Raphael (who 'originally' described Utopia to More), has ever been able to find the city, much less physically explore it as Raphael claims to have done. Between the European discovery of the Americas, spurring dreams of colonization across Europe, and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which forced Europe to search for new trade routes to Asia, even the vaguest approximation of Utopia's location would have set many off in search of it; by avoiding establishing the location, readers' attention is taken off of quests for imaginary riches and onto the political and social critiques. Rather than just ignore the absence of Utopia's location, More has both himself and Gilles mention in their respective letters that they still need to ask Raphael, as he never said.

³² Ibid., 12.

The meat of *Utopia* is separated into two parts: Book One, a conversation between More, Raphael, the Cardinal, and a group of others about imaginary countries and hypothetical social situations, and Book Two, which focuses solely on Raphael's visit to Utopia. More writes Book One as a personal account, directly inserting himself both figuratively into the story and physically in the location (More was in Antwerp at the time of the writing). He introduces his friend Peter Gilles, and takes a paragraph to heap praise on him: "He is much respected by his own people, and holds an important post in that town; but he fully deserves promotion to the highest post of all."³³ Grounding the work among recognizable people and places makes the story more believable as it heads into the Raphael's fantastical voyage, supporting a stronger basis for More's critique. He further establishes the exact time setting of his present day Europe by referencing the recent discoveries of Amerigo Vespucci, even placing Raphael on the ship with Vespucci.

By putting Raphael on one of Amerigo Vespucci's ships, More is increasing the credibility of his narrator. Vespucci's four trips (referenced in the text as "those Four Voyages"³⁴) instilled in Europe a spirit of colonization, exploration, and expansion. More capitalizes on this by placing his narrator on those voyages and publishing the work within a few years of Vespucci's journey. By including characters like the bishop mentioned in the letter, he gives the impression that many are already setting sail to colonize and convert Utopia, pushing others to act quickly. He also appeals to the European readers' sentiments of the time by slyly demonizing Africa or South America by referencing the "vast deserts parched by perpetual heat" at the equator. (He also notes

³³ Ibid., 16.

³⁴ Ibid., 17.

“there are no signs of cultivation, and no animal life, except for snakes and wild beasts, or equally wild and dangerous human beings.”³⁵). He does this to connect with the time’s readers, heightening the believability of the narrative.

Despite his attempts to place *Utopia* into a believable framework, More names his narrator in an attempt to promote skepticism in his readers. In the beginning of Book One, More and Peter Gilles observe and discuss Raphael Nonsenso, the centerpiece of Book One and the narrator of Book Two. Raphael functions as the liaison to Utopia, being the only person in England to have visited the country. Gilles compares Raphael to Ulysses and Plato, highlighting his many intelligence and academic training, but this also creates a conflicting image of a learned and scholarly man with a last name that predisposes the reader to dismiss his logic. (Raphael’s last name was changed to ‘Nonsenso’ in the Penguin edition of the book, which is the edition referenced here; in other editions, the last name is ‘Hythlodæus,’ translated from Greek as ‘distributor of nonsense’).³⁶ If one is arguing that *Utopia* is a work of satire, then everything Nonsenso describes will be exactly that—nonsense. On the other hand, as Nonsenso is the narrator for a majority of the work, the nonsense could alter the typical reader’s understanding of the way society in Utopia functions. In his letter to Gilles, More has already established that he holds little faith in the audience of his work, and is here most likely assuming that the intricacies and logical developments of Utopia will be lost on European readers. More even pokes fun at his future critics, saying that “some are so literal-minded that the slightest hint of irony affects them... Others come to different conclusions every time

³⁵ Ibid., 18

³⁶ Ibid., xii

they stand up or sit down.”³⁷ More understood the mixed reaction that *Utopia*’s publication would bring, and his jokes about the critics still resonate today.

Book One: Raphael’s Paradoxes

If Thomas More wanted *Utopia* to be taken seriously by his contemporary European audience, he would have to show the necessity of many of the strange laws and customs of the Utopians. To do this, Raphael proposes a series of events to draw out the problems facing Europeans and how the limited perspective of those in control inhibit solutions from being formed. Raphael’s question-and-answer also shows how England’s current political system is incapable of keeping the entire population happy, as the rich always profit at the expense of the common man; this sets the stage for More’s system, which inherently encourages complacency.

Before Book Two begins and Utopia is brought to life, More extensively shows how different Raphael is compared to the other characters. He is almost presented as the antithesis of More, going against everything More publicly believed in. This is done through the development of a question: should Raphael employ his talents in the service of the king? More, mirroring his own life, is very supportive of the idea, just as he would serve as a pillar of support throughout most of King Henry VIII’s reign.

The rest of Book One is spent in argument among the various characters who gather to listen to Raphael. Raphael proposes a series of hypothetical problems and his solutions, always in opposition with the general opinion. He does this in an attempt to show how futile it is to fight the status quo, using the determined challenges as evidence that he would not succeed as an advisor for the king. Because More is writing for both his

³⁷ Ibid., 10.

fictional self and for Raphael, it is slightly ambiguous which view truly represents his political beliefs, if not both.

Raphael begins by criticizing the death penalty for thieves, arguing that if the government served its purpose, theft would not be necessary. If the unfortunate were provided a means of livelihood, he reasons, then “nobody’s under the frightful necessity of becoming first a thief and then a corpse.”³⁸ In response to repeated interjections from the Cardinal, Raphael describes various situations that force citizens to turn to stealing, all of them mirroring English society. First is the nobleman who loses his rank and, due to his lack of skills, is not able to find any kind of employment; second is the army, a breeding ground of skilled thieves, who steal governments; and third are the everyday citizens, victims of laissez-faire economic regulations that only benefited the rich. To end, Raphael summarizes his main point: “Thus a few greedy people have converted one of England’s greatest natural advantages into a national disaster.”³⁹ He is specifically referencing the dramatic negative effects of enclosure, a movement that swept Great Britain in the 16th century and, by the dawn of the 17th century, caused numerous revolts and rebellions.

Sheep farming in England in the 1500s was becoming increasingly profitable, and many of the arable farmlands were being converted to pastures for sheep grazing. This practice responded directly to the era’s economic instability, caused by Henry VIII’s unsuccessful wartime ambitions and outlandish personal lifestyle; he raised taxes to pay for his expensive wars, leading to a rise in inflation, and the lords began to look for areas to cut costs. This led to enclosure, where common lands were fenced off for sheep. For

³⁸ Ibid., 22

³⁹ Ibid., 26.

the lords who owned large swaths of land, the benefits were twofold: not only could they take advantage of the high price of wool, but tending sheep required far fewer laborers than farming, which allowed them to hugely cut their expenses. But rural families who only had farming skills were unable to find work, widening the lower class, while the rich raked in more and more money.⁴⁰

Enclosure is described by Raphael to set the foundation for his comparison and contrast of Utopia and England. More choosing to highlight this practice—one that was still in full swing at the time of publishing—makes the narrative much more timely; readers then would see themselves in these situations and empathize more with Raphael’s (or More’s) advice: “Stop the rich from cornering markets and establishing virtual monopolies.”⁴¹ The redistribution of wealth is the basis for the soon to be proposed communal property system that Raphael finds necessary to fix society and end thievery. More praises the system, finding it much more efficient, and argues that England should investigate adopting it. More’s emotional appeal to his readers furthered his real life political goals as well; after becoming Lord Chancellor in 1529, he added a touch of humanity to the British court system by allowing judges to use their conscience in court rulings to mitigate severe punishments for misdemeanor crimes. The same logic underlies Raphael’s thievery speech, written thirteen years prior to More’s overhaul. It is possible that More used Raphael as a spokesman to test the public reaction to some of the ideas he was considering implementing himself, and by integrating the public’s criticisms of the fictional system into his literal political changes, he was able to perfect the implementation.

⁴⁰ Paul Warde. “Enclosure,” in *Europe, 1450 to 1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World*, ed. Jonathan Deward (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2004), 256-258.

⁴¹ More, 27

Raphael's audience in the text reacts much the same way that most of More's readers would have and immediately rejects the new ideas. Once the Cardinal sees the logic in trying, though, the audience shifts its opinion: "This, from the Cardinal, was enough to make everyone wildly in favour of an idea which nobody had taken seriously when I produced it."⁴² The audience will follow their leader down whichever path he chooses, just as the English population will follow theirs (or so More believes). It is even plausible that the Cardinal stands for Henry VIII, who More had a close friendship with; the conversation could have followed the one More had to convince Henry to allow his reforms—or maybe that followed the book. This highlights the 'follow-the-leader' mentality of the politicians in More's fictional England, hinting that implementing Utopian ideas depends more on who is implementing the ideas, rather than what is actually being implemented.

Book Two: The Formation of Utopia

After spending Book One highlighting all the problems he found in contemporary European society, Raphael's descriptions of Utopia form the bulk of Book Two. Stylistically, the two books follow much of the same format, using speech headings and presenting the events almost like a play script. While Book One features interjections and asides from the audience Raphael is speaking with, Book Two is devoid of voices other than Raphael's. Still, Raphael speaks in the second person and counters criticisms never raised, meaning the same point of view (Raphael addressing the audience with his story) is maintained through the whole work, though for different reasons in the two sections. Raphael engages the audience in Book One to improve his credibility; by having the Cardinal and More stand for the audience and voice their reservations or agreements with

⁴² Ibid., 32

Raphael's proposals, More strengthens his position by anticipating the concerns that real life readers would have. By building this credibility through hypothetical situations, Raphael is able to present the 'superior' Utopian customs as fact without commentary from the audience, having already proved his credentials to speak on behalf of Utopia: "But you should have been with me in Utopia and personally seen their manners and customs as I did, for I lived there for more than five years and would never have wished to leave except to make known that new world."⁴³ Thus begins More's attempt, whether literal or satirical, to find solutions for the imperfections in European society, as well as critique the hypocritical social customs and laws by ironically giving Utopia many of the same characteristics of European society.

From what is shown, Utopia is a largely successful attempt at a functioning utopian society. The main reason it succeeds is due to the Utopians themselves; they have been conditioned and delegated to various parts of the economic machine that supports their society. Many of the aspects of Utopia that Raphael praises function as tools to subvert the Utopians' individuality, and their philosophies ensure that they remain happy, regardless of their situation, by just fulfilling the collective's needs. Michel Foucault attributed the success of empires to the state's ability to control the development of the population; broadly, the state's power centered on the "reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life."⁴⁴ This means that the state would assume control over the power of life or, in more practical terms, power over the right to live; by threatening the population with death for breaking society's rules, the state is able to force its regulations without much input from the citizens. Utopia's existence hinges on

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Foucault, 136

the population's complete obedience, and those who dissented were publicly ostracized. The social stigmas associated with breaking the law were enough to dissuade most Utopians, and the threat of leaving the community or death frightened the rest.

For Utopia to succeed, it must accomplish two tasks: establish complete control over the population while, at the same time, keeping them complacent and proactive in the community. The former is accomplished by establishing control over death, the latter by reforming the population's cultural, religious, or social beliefs to support the community's needs over an individual's needs. As a Utopia is a perfect society on all fronts, dissent cannot exist without rupturing the entire society's foundation; More, realizing this, created a system to control the population without seeming oppressive, to regulate functions without the guise of an authoritarian government.

Marriage

Utopia features many strange customs when it comes to marriage, with most of the more unique traditions underscoring the Utopians' practical—as opposed to emotional—approach to marriage. A few of the laws, such as the one limiting marriage to women over eighteen and boys over twenty-two,⁴⁵ seem rational enough (rational meaning that contemporary readers could see the validity of the law) and, while maybe a bit excessive, mirror laws still present today. Two aspects in particular exemplify the more fantastical elements of Utopia: the punishments for adultery and premarital sex and a peculiar ritual the bride and groom engage in before marriage.

The former demonstrates Utopia's ambivalence towards emotion in favor of more practical and economical decisions. When two Utopians are found to have engaged in premarital sex, not only are they both shamed and barred from ever marrying, but the

⁴⁵ More, 83

couple who run the household where the tryst occurred are also disgraced for allowing it to happen. They do this “because they think very few people would want to get married—which means spending one’s whole life with the same person, and putting up with all the inconveniences that this involves—if they weren’t carefully prevented from having any sexual intercourse otherwise.”⁴⁶ Utopian society’s highest objective is efficiency, leading them to create the most logical solution to a scenario. In this case, by allowing sex strictly as a reward for marriage, and shunning those who do not wait, the two-parent nuclear family is essentially cemented as the only viable familial option. It also shows that the Utopians had a low opinion of marriage, believing that no one would suffer the “inconveniences” of marriage if they were allowed to have sex outside of it.

In contrast to More’s close relationship to King Henry VIII, divorce laws in Utopia are very strict, as if to foreshadow More’s criticism of the yet-to-occur English Reformation. Leading up to King Henry VIII’s reign, England was a predominantly Catholic nation where divorce was not allowed and annulments were hard to come by. Henry VIII sought an annulment because his wife had not provided a male heir, but, for political reasons, the Pope denied the king’s request. King Henry, enraged by the refusal, cut England off from the Vatican and established himself “supreme head in earth” of the newly formed Church of England. This was a quick turnaround for King Henry, who just thirteen years earlier, with the help of More, published “Defense of the Seven Sacraments,” a document that defended Catholicism against Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses. King Henry’s split from the Catholic Church and the formation of a new state church, the Church of England, did not sit well with More. A strong Catholic and believer in the sanctity of marriage, More crafted the Utopian divorce tradition to mirror his

⁴⁶ Ibid., 83-84

personal beliefs on the subject, only allowing divorce in “cases of adultery or intolerably bad behavior” and never solely because the spouse has “deteriorated physically.”⁴⁷

There were rumors that Henry VIII was cheating on his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, with Mary Boleyn and Anne Boleyn, his future wife and reason for the fracturing of the church. Utopia finds adultery disgraceful, sentencing those who engage in it to penal servitude. They deem forgiveness of adultery as another kind of offense: “But if they continue to love their undeserving mates, they’re allowed to stay married to them, provided they’re willing to share their working conditions.”⁴⁸ While it is probably unlikely that More’s attribution of these qualities to Utopia all come directly from an attack on Henry VIII, as it would still be some years before the English Reformation, these rules would fit remarkably well into the public More, who would be executed for these same beliefs. The Utopians, meanwhile, use marriage as a form of social control; the husband and wife are in charge of the household, and are responsible for raising children that also adhere to Utopian principles. For this reason, marriage is a particularly significant method for maintaining social cohesion.

Education

In 16th century England, education was reserved for the sons of the aristocracy; girls who were fortunate enough to receive an education (usually focused around how to keep a husband happy) did so in the homes of nobles, rather than at schoolhouses. At this time, the idea of a free and public education for all genders was unheard of, as many rulers feared that an educated lower class would reduce the state’s power.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 85

The Utopians, however, believe the opposite: for citizens to be functioning and useful members of society, they must have the education required to help sustain the community. Children in Utopia receive primary education, regardless of their gender, and all citizens have free periods throughout the day, during which they follow academic pursuits that they have an interest in. The latter idea is especially important, as Utopia's economic system is centered around it: "They [the Utopians] never force people to work unnecessarily, for the main purpose of their whole economy is to give each person as much time free from physical drudgery as the needs of the community will allow, so that he can cultivate his mind—which they regard as the secret of a happy life."⁴⁹ At the same time, however, education does not take precedent over contribution to society; only the most intelligent Utopians are allowed to become full-time students.

While praising these qualities of the Utopian education system, Raphael seems to take fault with their progress in the study of philosophy. He boasts of the contributions that *A Short Introduction to Logic* added to the field and is surprised when the Utopians are "even blind to the existence of that notorious universal, M A N."⁵⁰ Raphael's mock surprise shows his own distaste, and further jokes about the mock importance of the subject. The Utopians have discovered how to read the weather and other useful scientific advances, but Raphael notes that they do not have an interest in discovering the "why" of the world around them; concerns like these have no place in the Utopian society, as there is no educational or intellectual benefit (in their eyes) to gain. By focusing only on practical matters, the Utopians learn to think only of the community, and never of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 59

⁵⁰ Ibid., 70

themselves or their place in that community; this, along with their philosophy on happiness, is one of the core foundations of the society's continued existence.

Many of the ideas that More worked into Utopia's education system were formed through the schooling of his own children. Perhaps the most progressive was the idea that boys and girls should receive the same education; in a letter to William Gunnell, one of the children's tutors, More attacks the prevailing idea that men are more suited to education than women, saying that "both, therefore, are equally suited for those studies by which reason is cultivated, and becomes fruitful like a ploughed land on which the seed of good lessons has been sown."⁵¹ More would further advocate for women's education in other letters and writings, leading *Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More* author Thomas Bridgett to declare that "More will ever stand foremost in the rank of the defenders of female culture."⁵²

Gender equality is embraced for the most part. Boys and girls have the same right to education, and while some jobs, such as knitting, are relegated to women, both genders work together in agriculture.⁵³ Men and women share in the work of the community, allowing everyone to work only six hours a day and still produce the goods necessary for Utopia's survival.⁵⁴ Women also have the same rights as men in divorce proceedings and can even become priests, but while More's Utopia may feature a more liberal idea of women's role in society, More and his Utopia are still a product of patriarchal English

⁵¹ Thomas Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E. E. Reynolds, trans. Philip E. Hallett (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 1966), 95.

⁵² Thomas Edward Bridgett, *The Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England and Martyr Under Henry VIII*, (London: Burns and Oates, Limited, 1892), 132.

⁵³ More, 55.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

society. Men dominate the households and are responsible for punishing their wives, as well as listening to their sins once a month.

Men and women serve the same functions in Utopia, and therefore obtain the same education, because education is more about creating complacent citizens than educated trailblazers who would push the community forward. Rather, the priests “do their utmost to ensure that, while children are still at an impressionable age, they’re given the right idea about things—the sort of ideas best calculated to preserve the structure of their society.”⁵⁵ The Utopians believe that wrong ideas contribute to moral defects, which are dangerous to the community’s way of life. By indoctrinating the youth with beliefs that serve the community’s collective ideals, “these ideas will persist throughout adult life, and so contribute greatly to the safety of the state.”⁵⁶ To contemporary readers, this method seems to promote the ‘Big Brother’ and brainwashing agendas of dystopian governments; More, however, was unexposed to many of those ideas, and simply followed the practice in teaching his children: “[For More,] education was not liberal. It was designed to propagate virtue and curb moral weakness and individuality.”⁵⁷ That the priests are tasked with educating the children highlights More’s synthesis of a strictly Catholic education and his belief that education and Christian humility were the keys to leading an innocent life. The Utopians decry parts of British education that More himself would have objected to, mainly ideas that contradict the omnipresent, omniscient, and all-powerful nature of God, such as astrology and man’s place in society.

Religion

⁵⁵ Ibid., 105.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ John Guy, *Thomas More* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 76.

Although polytheistic religions do exist in Utopia, Raphael notes, in rather grandiose terms, that “the vast majority take the much more sensible view that there is a single divine power, unknown, eternal, infinite, inexplicable, and quite beyond the grasp of the human mind, diffused throughout this universe of ours, not as a physical substance, but as an active force. This power they call ‘The Parent.’ They give him credit for everything that happens to everything, for all beginnings and ends, all growth, development, and change. Nor do they recognize any other form of deity.”⁵⁸ This deity is called Mythras and imbues all aspects of Nature with its presence, creating the idea of an omnipresent being. The extreme similarities to Christianity are deliberately developed by More, explaining the ease Raphael had converting the Utopians, though the connection seems to have been lost on him: “Anyway, whatever the explanation, quite a lot of Utopians adopted our religion, and were baptized.”⁵⁹

Utopia allows freedom of religion, as long as two principles are not broken. The first states that anyone is free to attempt to convert others to his or her religion, but only through rational discussion; attacks on other religions, personal abuse, and other actions deemed “too aggressive in religious controversy” result in banishment from the community.⁶⁰ The second principle is that, no matter what religious system they follow, Utopians must believe in the immortal nature of the soul and that some sort of divine power orchestrates the universe’s events. Though not illegal to believe otherwise, public atheism has heavy consequences, barring the nonbeliever from all public acknowledgements and jobs. Utopians view nonbelievers as fighting their way of life, because if a person only fears earthly judgment and not spiritual judgment, then he will

⁵⁸ More, 98.
⁵⁹ Ibid., 99.
⁶⁰ Ibid., 100.

only work to further his own interests, rather than those of the community.⁶¹ That being said, "freedom of religion" might be a misnomer, as "there's nothing to be seen or heard in their churches which can't equally well be applied to all religions."⁶²

Upon death, the soul, rather than going to Heaven or another after-death destination, remains among friends and family, meaning most funerals are a joyful and reflective occasions, celebrating the deceased's character and affection. The body is cremated, "more in a spirit of reverence than of grief," and the living discuss the virtues of the deceased loved one, both to instill those virtues in themselves and to please the listening spirit.⁶³ The dead serve as "guardian angels" for the living, and play a role in helping the community in death: "The sense of their ancestors' presence discourages any bad behavior in private."⁶⁴ If the person does not accept death happily, however, the Utopians assume it stems from a guilty conscience, and the body is buried in silence.

The second principle is especially important in maintaining the Utopian society. The society functions through the ideal that by furthering the community's interests, the Utopians are furthering their own personal happiness; it is the desire to help their fellow Utopians that they were complacent and happy to forego personal luxuries or interests. A self-involved society would never be able to sustain itself, so More created a religion that pressures the Utopians to keep the society functioning. The dead watching over them in private ensures that the Utopians will always follow community rules, even when alone, by creating an omnipresent force always watching over, like a familial Big Brother.

⁶¹ Ibid., 101.

⁶² Ibid., 106-107.

⁶³ Ibid., 102.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 103.

One of the more unique qualities of Utopia is the presence of voluntary euthanasia, which is almost encouraged among Utopians. Though suicide was common among the ancient Romans and Greeks, Christian theologians such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas turned it into an unforgivable sin because of the idea that human life is a gift from God and is not ours to toy with.⁶⁵ Though it would become slightly more accepted during the Age of Enlightenment (“suicide as a release from sickness and suffering was considered an act of human liberty, carrying no guilt or blame”⁶⁶), the idea that suicide violates the Sixth Commandment permeated culture and remains relevant today.

Thomas More never expressed his personal views on voluntary suicide, but during the 16th century, *Utopia* was one of the few proponents of the practice. Utopia pressures its citizens to commit voluntary suicide when the person has become a burden on the state. That is not to say suicide itself was accepted in Utopian society; any suicide outside of the parameters set by the priests meant you “forfeit all rights to either burial or cremation, and your body is just thrown unceremoniously into a pond.”⁶⁷ Because Utopians keep the best interests of the community in mind, euthanasia, if sanctioned by the government, was an honorable death: the Utopians are putting the needs of the community above any personal motives. One can choose to continue to live, and “everyone will go on treating him as kindly as ever,”⁶⁸ but this goes against the Utopian maxim of always serving as a benefit to the community, never a burden.

⁶⁵ Michael Cholbi, “Suicide,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/suicide/>.

⁶⁶ Gesundheit, Steinberg, Glick, Or, Jotkovitz, “Euthanasia: An Overview and the Jewish Perspective,” *Cancer Investigation* 24, no. 6 (2006): 623.

⁶⁷ More, 83.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Did More himself believe in voluntary suicide? Due to the topic's highly controversial nature and deep connection with religious authority, if More did see the value in voluntary suicide, it is unlikely that he voiced that opinion. At the same time, however, euthanasia here serves as a way to eliminate members of the population, at the government's encouragement, that are not able to contribute to the public good, reducing the amount of resources required to sustain the community. It also restricts death to the control of the government, keeping the power over life out of the hands of the Utopians. In More's land, this helps the government prevent the formation of an aging population that would have to be supported, as well as ensuring that power remains consolidated.

Philosophy of Happiness

For the Utopians, the ultimate goal is to live a happy life, and a complex set of ideas ensure that happiness ties directly into supporting the community. Believing that Nature wants everyone to be happy, the Utopians find it holy to give up a personal pleasure for someone else's pleasure, but depriving someone of a pleasure for your own is an immoral act. As long as one tends to the needs of the community first, he is free to pursue his own interests. Defining pleasure and distinguishing between moral and immoral pleasures create the basis of this philosophy.

In terms of moral pleasures, the Utopians categorize them into two groups: mental pleasures and physical pleasures. Mental pleasure results from the satisfaction of understanding something complicated or the memory of a well-spent life and good things to come, while physical pleasure stems from fulfilling necessary functions, like eating or scratching, and the feeling of a healthy body. Both of these pleasures train the Utopians to find happiness in their everyday living; as there are always good things to come in

Utopia, mental pleasures are abound, and the lack of disease and illness in Utopia means that they enjoy good health, resulting in physical pleasure, every day.

On the opposite end are immoral pleasures, or basically anything that Western society finds pleasure in. Fancy clothes are dismissed as useless (“Why is it better to be dressed in fine woollen thread than in coarse?”), rare jewelry is decried as superfluous (“Why shouldn’t a fake give you just as much pleasure, if you can’t, with your own eyes, distinguish it from a real one?”), and wealth in general is irrational (“Is their pleasure a real one, or merely a form of delusion?”).⁶⁹ Gambling and hunting is thrown in too, as well as a denunciation of nobility that gain their title only because “they happen to belong to a family which has been rich for several generations.”⁷⁰ People who enjoy these habits have been conditioned to find them pleasurable, but it is a fake pleasure that masks true pleasures; the nature of pleasure remains unchanged, regardless of whether one finds pleasure in these immoral activities.

Utopia can only sustain itself through the full cooperation of the population, and More knew that. To create an economic system where everyone is equal, their philosophy shuns material and monetary objects for natural feelings that come from just surviving. By equating pleasures that contradict the Utopian ideals Utopia is founded upon with immorality and selfishness, the population is trained to value the society they have and not to yearn for what they do not have.

Conclusion

Thomas More was aware that some facets of his Utopia would never be realized; he himself was a staunch disavower of communism (though perhaps because of practical

⁶⁹ Ibid., 74-75.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 74

reasons more so than philosophical ones). He did, however, create an idealistic society where people act to benefit others rather than themselves, allowing the well-being of the group to supersede the individual. The ideas More presented are not meant to be taken as a whole and applied to a nation, but to highlight some of the beliefs and actions of then-Europeans in an attempt to produce a more communal England. More's Utopia can likely never be realized, for many of his ideas require that human nature and the desire for power take a backseat to the greater good, a compromise that humans have proven time and time again is impossible to make. What happens when an attempt to create a utopia goes awry?

Chapter 3: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

*"There is more than one kind of freedom," said Aunt Lydia. "Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it."*⁷¹

Introduction

Margaret Atwood occupies a significantly different temporal context than Thomas More does. By the time *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985, the world's search for a utopia had failed, resulting in some of the most disastrous social experiments in human history, such as Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Dystopias flourished and took on a new importance as technology gave rise to surveillance and monitoring concerns, unheard of previous to the 20th century. With an increasingly fragmented society, the quick-fix that utopias promoted became more impossible, and readers began to look for warnings and predictions over philosophy and conjecture.

Offred, a handmaid in the home of the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy, narrates *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her story takes place in Gilead, an oppressive and authoritarian society that replaced the United States government through military intervention in response to plummeting birth rates. The society fuels its power through a strict patriarchal structure and, within that structure, a further hierarchy of women. The society is based on Old Testament principles, morphing the United States to a neo-biblical theocratic dictatorship. Believing her role in the greater society to be insignificant, Offred is a complacent narrator, offering memories of the time before

⁷¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998): 24.

Gilead to contrast with her current situation, but never trying to escape her situation or change it.

Grounded in the 1980s political climate, the conditions that led to Gilead's formation in Atwood's fictional world are still present today. Dystopias are most effective when the circumstances of their formation run parallel with actual or current events. *1984*'s vision of a totalitarian government resonated with a world dealing with the Soviet Union and its influence when it was published in 1949, but the surveillance capacity exerted by Big Brother remains relevant today in real world governments and their activities. In the same way, though *The Handmaid's Tale* was written to mirror a rising Islamic Iran, recent world events warrant a look back at how *The Handmaid's Tale* fits into our current historical framework, helping to determine how, if at all, Atwood's future could become our own.

The Creation of Gilead

In essence, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a glimpse of the turn the United States could take if religion is increasingly incorporated into politics. The transformation of the United States into an oppressive and regressive theocracy is detailed by Offred, just one of the women forced to serve as handmaids. Throughout the narrative, she provides glimpses of "the time before," allowing the reader to compare her present situation with one more familiar. The reader learns the circumstances of Gilead's rise and the new political and legal system through flashbacks and present time narration. The United States, now named Gilead, morphed into a fundamentalist theocracy ruled by an unknown Christian power that favors Old Testament laws and punishments, reinstating gender separation, caste systems, and a nationwide surveillance system to oppress the population and

enforce the ruling group's power. The apathy of the American public allows the dictatorship to take hold and build its power; vague Islamist terrorists are blamed for the murder of every member of Congress, and even after the dictatorship 'temporarily' suspends the Constitution, "there wasn't even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on."⁷²

The United States' transition into dystopic Gilead is not immediate; a slow implementation of reforms and censors allows the new government to reshape culture, politics, and economics. The reforms, issued for the vague reason of "protection" against unknown enemies, are accepted by the public as necessary: "newspapers were censored and some were closed down, for security reasons they said. The roadblocks began to appear, and Identipasses. Everyone approved of that, since it was obvious you couldn't be too careful."⁷³ The digitization of currency and tying of wealth to ID numbers grants the new government the ability to bring down the entire country's economy at once, if desired; rather than the entire country, though, only women are targeted, and any money they have now become the property of their husband or other male next-of-kin.⁷⁴ When the government gradually introduces the foundation for the new political system, the population starts to see the reforms as essential in protecting their welfare and, as they had already given up many of the rights needed to fight it, the citizens are powerless when women in the United States simultaneously lost their freedom. Confusion ensures that any protest uprisings would be handled quickly: marches are fired upon, buildings are burned, and paranoia seeped into day-to-day life. Humans value freedom, but perhaps

⁷² Ibid., 174.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 178.

the one concept valued more is security; by creating circumstances where the population is willing to sacrifice freedom in the name of security, Gilead is able to slowly institute reforms and regulations that would normally be fought against. With the threat of being reported for disloyalty lurking between friendships and an unknown, powerful force—Offred describes it as “the police, or the army, or whoever they were,”⁷⁵ noting that it is not the same army from before—using any means necessary to crush the population under fear, the dystopian government of Gilead is able to rise, turning America into the Orwellian society so often referenced, but never truly realized.

As *The Handmaid’s Tale* follows Offred’s first person perspective, the greater context that facilitated the development of a dystopian state, other than declining birthrates, cannot be provided due to Offred’s limited point of view. The “Historical Notes” epilogue, however, provides the circumstances leading to Gilead’s formation. Structured as a speech given in the year 2195 at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, the pre-Gileadean world described sounds similar to our own: following an arms stalemate of the world’s superpowers, “the signing of the classified Spheres of Influence Accord ... left the superpowers free to deal, unhampered by interference, with the growing number of rebellions within their own empires.”⁷⁶ Thus, governments were able to handle dissenters with whatever means they deemed necessary; for the United States, however, the Accord ensured that no other countries would step in once the overthrow began.

When compared to Atwood’s pre-Gilead United States, our modern United States is on an eerily similar path. Islamophobia skyrocketed after the September 11, 2011

⁷⁵ Ibid., 180.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 306.

terrorist attacks, and prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have made Americans wary of further attacks by extremist terrorists. The attack against Congress in *The Handmaid's Tale* provided the justification for Gilead to begin instituting reforms to curb freedom, just as surveillance activity in the United States picked up after 9/11. Today, “protecting freedom” has become justification for secret mass surveillance programs, as well as the clandestine imprisonment and torture of suspected enemies. Industrialization and globalization, as well as record spending on defense programs, has increased the number of pesticides, nuclear plants, and chemical weapons around the world, polluting the water and air supply; with birthrates in the United States reaching historic lows,⁷⁷ Atwood’s vision of the Republic of Gilead could soon come to fruition.

Unlike utopias, Gilead did not have aspirations of a perfect and equal society or a sustainable state; rather, the ideals behind Gilead are inherently racist, sexist, and intolerant of any mainstream religion. African Americans, referred to as “Children of Ham,” were transported to “National Homeland One” (North Dakota), where they would be forced to farm.⁷⁸ Jews were deemed special by Gilead and given the option to convert to the Old Testament Christianity or emigrate to Israel, and Jews that were caught with religious items were hung. (Offred mentions that many of them decide to emigrate, but it is likely that most of them died on the way; Professor Pieixoto says in the epilogue “more than one boatload of Jews was simply dumped into the Atlantic.”)⁷⁹ A recently defeated Baptist stronghold is mentioned in passing, and Quakers were rounded up as sympathizers to the pre-Gilead cause, many serving as stops on the “Underground

⁷⁷ Carol Morello, “U.S. pregnancy rates slide, near historic lows,” *The Washington Post*, Dec. 4, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pregnancy-rates-slide-near-record-lows/2013/12/04/afad3bf6-5d06-11e3-bc56-c6ca94801fac_story.html.

⁷⁸ Atwood, 83-84.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 307.

Femaleroad,” referencing the pre-Civil War Underground Railroad. From the beginning, Gilead functioned as a dystopia, never even attempting to take the path of a utopia.

For a utopia to function, certain rights had to be sacrificed: ownership of property, privacy, and command of one’s body, to name a few. In today’s age, any government encroachment into these principles results in the citizens’ cries of an authoritarian Big Brother through media and protests. The fine line between a utopia and a dystopia runs through these rights; the method of implementation generally affects how sacrificing those rights is received, and the reaction of the population sets the tone that separates a utopia from a dystopia.

The Power of Sexuality

The power over death had lost its authority over the centuries, requiring Gilead to find a new control method to break and subjugate the population. Whereas Utopia’s method of control lay in its power over life and death, the deployment of sexuality, as Michel Foucault calls it, following the seventeenth century made power over death inadequate in properly controlling a population. Mankind’s sexuality awakened, and it came imbued with the death instinct: “[The temptation is] to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and the sovereignty of sex. Sex is worth dying for.”⁸⁰ Offred mentions several times that love is the only thing worth living for, but while governments can take life, but they cannot take sexuality; it can only be repressed, but even this is difficult once it has been awakened. Foucault goes on to say that for successful governments in modern times, “it is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of value and utility. Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its

⁸⁰ Foucault, 156.

murderous splendor.”⁸¹ Foucault means that governments cannot simply threaten the population with its power over life; it must use that power to order life and economic production in a way that comes naturally, and not from the constant threat of punishment that Gilead utilizes. Judicial institutions are depended on less, as the law and its the consequences of breaking it become the judge and jury; for a true dystopia, there can be no judicial or court system, as it would threaten to undermine the institution. Gilead, in its exploitation of the population, attempted to exert power by heavily regulating sexual intercourse, using the notion of sexuality to demean and break women into following new ideas about themselves and forgetting the notions of freedom, sexuality, choice, and love. While this may have been successful in forming the society and sustaining it for a short period, Gilead ultimately fails due to its “murderous splendor” that it showcases.

The rise of feminism in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly second wave feminism, resulted in new ideas on gender roles and women’s rights, some radical deviations from the previous norms. Women began to wrestle control of their bodies back from masculine constructs and to leave the defined household roles and fight for equal rights in the workplace and control over their reproductive rights. The increased access to abortion and contraceptives, combined with more women choosing not to have children, empowered women to assert their choice over what happens to their bodies.⁸² Flashbacks to a pre-Gilead United States reveal that Offred’s mother fought for a feminist movement that correlates with the one of the 1960s-70s. A video Offred watches at the reeducation center shows her mother participating in a ‘Take Back The Night’ rally, a campaign to end sexual violence against women. In another scene with Offred and her husband Luke,

⁸¹ Ibid., 144.

⁸² Martha Rampton, “Three Waves of Feminism,” *Pacific* (2008).

the mother chastises them for not appreciating “how many women’s lives, how many women’s *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over”⁸³ to earn them the freedom they take for granted.

Feminism was essential for Gilead’s formation; the problem of declining birthrates was easily blamed on women obtaining more abortions and neglecting their duty to have children. Although a post-Gilead study found that “some infertility ... was willed,” the main reasons included the spread of AIDS, nuclear accidents, chemical and biological weapon discharge, and unregulated pesticide use.⁸⁴ The constructors of Gilead blamed the feminist movement for changing social attitudes that led to the decreasing birthrates, and by citing scripture that marked woman as inferior to men, reinstated the patriarchal gender hierarchy and stripped women of almost all rights—most importantly, the right to control their bodies.

Ironically, most of the methods the reformers used to instate new ideas about women were taken from the feminist movement. Coming out of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s was the women’s right to her body; prominent feminist writer Susan Brownmiller wrote that “men who commit rape have served in effect as front-line masculine shock troops, terrorist guerillas in the longest sustained battle the world has ever known.” Women started to fight back in this battle, and ‘Take Back the Night’ marches were held across the country to make streets safe for women.⁸⁵ The 1973 *Boston Women’s Health Book Collective* asserted that women “are denied control over [their] own very personal childbearing experience,” from the moment of conception to the

⁸³ Atwood, 121.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 304.

⁸⁵ Susan Brownmiller, “We Cannot Rely on Existing Ideologies,” in *Feminism in Our Time*, ed. Miriam Schneir (New York: Vintage, 1994): 282.

separation of the baby and mother after birth.⁸⁶ The publication of *Sexual Politics* in 1970 highlighted how the patriarchal state is tied to men's domination of women in sex and other aspects of life, noting that "sexual role is not a matter of biological identity but of class or caste."⁸⁷ Gilead turned many of these ideas around to create a subjugated class of women: rape is blamed on the woman for leading the man on, as the woman must have tempted him in some way; handmaids are forced to engage in childrearing, but receive none of the credit for giving birth or even time with their child; and the hierarchy of Gilead is based directly on sexual role. Inherent in all of these methods was the absence of choice; Gilead took away the freedom of choice that women had recently gained, particularly choice in sexual matters. Every step further diminished feminine sexuality, turning a recently awakened freedom into a nightmare.

Following the creation of Gilead, women were divided into several different categories with various societal functions that, within the patriarchal society, instituted a hierarchal structure of women. Women who were lucky married high-ranking elite in the new empire, granting them the special status of Wife; Marthas, older women who did all the cooking and cleaning, staffed these women's households. The wives of the lower classes were called Econowives, and were expected to serve as Wife, Martha, and Handmaid to their husbands. Handmaids, made up of women in their reproductive prime, were tasked with repairing the nation's damaged population by serving as a sort of surrogate mother for high-ranking commanders and their wives. Before being assigned to a commander, the handmaids underwent reeducation on ideas of sex and sexuality,

⁸⁶ Boston Women's Health Book Collective, "Childbearing," in *Feminism in Our Time*, ed. Miriam Schneir (New York: Vintage, 1994): 360.

⁸⁷ Kate Millett, "Sexual Politics," in *Feminism in Our Time*, ed. Miriam Schneir (New York: Vintage, 1994): 238.

intended to suppress any sexual desires. Aunts, women who were sympathetic to the cause or could not produce children, hammered traditional views of women and sexuality into the Handmaids, attempting to reverse the progressive ideas that resulted from the feminist movement. Handmaids consisted of women arrested after second marriages and non-marital relationships were declared illegal; those unable to produce children were sent to the Colonies, along with homosexuals and the old, to work in radioactive dumps and agriculture.⁸⁸

The subjugation of an entire gender is difficult, and even more difficult is training the subjugated group to accept their role in the hierarchy. Gilead does this by eliminating choice; as Aunt Lydia says, “We were a society dying of too much choice.”⁸⁹ This applies to the men also, and Gilead strips both genders of many of the choices that threaten power: love, marriage, occupation, clothing, education, etc. This freedom of choice, according to Gilead, led to the sinfulness of women and the downfall of the American political system. The most important choice taken away, though, was the choice of exercising sexual freedom.

Sexuality as a whole is suppressed in the handmaids, ironically, through sexual intercourse. The Marthas and the Wives are not allowed to experience sex, but when faced with chastity or ‘consensual’ rape, they are often happy to be in their position versus the position of a handmaid. Handmaids are forced to serve as “containers” whose sole purpose is to produce children for the upper class Commanders and Wives, and therefore in more precarious of a position than other women in the society. The handmaids are given three chances to produce a child with the Commander; after that,

⁸⁸ Atwood, 248.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 25.

they become classified as Unwomen and are sent to the colonies. The process of sexual intercourse with the Commander is designed to remove any instance of pleasure from the actual process: the handmaid, fully clothed, lays her head in the lap of the fully clothed Wife, which “signifies that [they] are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that [the wife] is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any.”⁹⁰ Forcing both women to participate in the ceremony reduces what is left of their humanity; the Wife is reminded that, regardless of her high status, she still has no control over her body. She is dependent upon the handmaid for a child, as the handmaid’s body serves as an extension of her own, though she herself is not able to experience sex with her husband. Likewise, the handmaid participates in the compulsory sexual intercourse against her will, but out of necessity: if she does not become pregnant, she risks dying in the colonies. The regulation of choice in Gilead is so engrained that Offred, when presented with a choice by the doctor to impregnate her and save her life, is unable to take it: “It’s the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation.”⁹¹

The driving idea behind this is to remove all associations of pleasure and intimacy from sexual intercourse. By reducing sex to a job, a job that is necessary for survival, the freedom that people exercised through it is taken away. There are examples of men exercising sexual freedom, such as when the Commander takes Offred to the brothel; the high-ranking men are able to bend the rules and not only obtain magazines and books from the time before, but also risqué outfits for use in the secret strip club. Here, successful women are dehumanized through forced prostitution. As the women who work at the nightclub are generally problem (i.e. resistant to being assimilated) or highly

⁹⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁹¹ Ibid., 61.

educated women, forcing them to have sex, without even the status of a handmaid, reduces them to objects to be used when the Commanders are bored with their handmaids and Wives.

As much as possible is done to dehumanize the women, and for the handmaids, part of this is achieved through a renaming process. Offred's name literally means "of Fred," Fred being the Commander's name; this reduces the handmaids to a piece of property, where even their name is a symbol of the oppression and objectification Gilead reduces them to. Names from the time before are forbidden, but Offred makes sure not to forget hers, as remembering her name is one of the only ways for her to make it through the dystopia she is living: "I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day."⁹² The name creates a hope that things can return to the way they were before Gilead, a hope that allows Offred to survive the subjugation being forced upon her. Having a name makes one an individual, and individuality in a dystopia is more valuable than anything; more than this, though, having a name makes one special. During a low moment, Offred laments "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me."⁹³ This is easy in the beginning; as times goes on, a name becomes harder and harder to remember, eventually "forc[ing] you to kill, within yourself."⁹⁴ When the memories are gone, so is the will to fight the oppressive regime.

The handmaid serves a significant role in the female hierarchy, particularly in motivating other women's compliance. Aunts and Wives exert power over them,

⁹² Ibid., 84.

⁹³ Ibid., 97.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 193.

allowing a portion of the female population a form of control to placate the loss of everything else. Marthas look at them with varying degrees of disgust and pity, a living symbol of the role they luckily avoided having. As handmaids have no one else to look down upon, they are forced to undergo extensive reeducation training, indoctrinating them to accept their function. The most successful and unique method of sustaining the indoctrination and ensuring the handmaid's subjugation is the Salvaging and Particicution ceremonies.

The Salvaging ceremony reminds all the women of Gilead—handmaids, wives, Marthas, and Econowives—the consequences of defying the law. Typically, violators sentenced to death are hung on hooks at a public viewing area called the Wall, where everyone can see the transgressors and their own fate if they dissent. Sometimes, however, a Salvaging is announced (always the day before, as that is “not enough time to get used to it”⁹⁵). Offred and the rest of the women are forced to watch the executions of two handmaids and a Wife, usually preceded with an announcement of the women's crimes. This time, however, Aunt Lydia, who is presiding over the ceremony, announces that their crimes will not be revealed, to prevent an outbreak of similar ones following the Salvaging. Offred and the rest of the women are left to speculate on the accuseds' crime, particularly the Wife: “As for the Wife, there's mostly just one thing they get salvaged for. They can do almost anything to us, but they aren't allowed to kill us, not legally. ... It could be adultery, of course. It could always be that. Or attempted escape.”⁹⁶

More than prevent copycat crimes, hiding the women's transgressions further scares the women into accepting their fate. The Wives glimpse a rare moment of their

⁹⁵ Ibid., 272.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 275.

vulnerability in the hierarchy, reminding them that though they may be at the top of the female social order, that status can easily be taken away. By not providing specific evidence of the Wife's crime, all of the possibilities are left hanging over the others' heads, possibilities that all of them have thought of acting upon until brutally reminded of Gilead's perceived omnipotence. The same applies to the handmaids; unsure of the crimes that their fellow handmaids committed, the women become paranoid of the potential reasons they were caught, but it also takes away a fundamental power of the handmaids: "Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all."⁹⁷ In a society where they have no control over their bodies or lives, the handmaids look to the executed as those who exerted a form of power over their destiny, and though they were caught, still represent a sign of resistance; by hiding the reasons for their execution, the women on stage become more faceless victims of Gilead's regime. The handmaids are even forced to display their unity with the Salvagers by symbolically touching the rope used to hang the lawbreakers and then their hearts, showing their "complicity in the death of this woman."⁹⁸ Overall, the Salvaging serves as a vague, public, and vicious method for Gilead to periodically push women back down and maintain the status quo.

Particular to the handmaids' subjugation is the Particicution ceremony. Aunt Lydia presents a man who has been convicted of rape, and heavily prods the handmaids' anger by claiming one of the women was pregnant and lost her baby. For a period of time, the women are allowed to do whatever they want to the man: maul, kick, scratch, bite, or tear him apart. For a fleeting moment, the handmaids are able to exert power and control over a man; the Wives, watching from above, have the pleasure of feeling

⁹⁷ Ibid., 275.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 276.

powerful for the man's demise while still feeling superior to the handmaids for not having to get their hands dirty. Gilead uses this ceremony to redirect the women's anger at a tangible and destroyable force, a sort of scapegoat for the women to act out their frustrations on, allowing the handmaids "to be able to tear a man apart with their bare hands every once in a while" in order to "act as a steam valve."⁹⁹ Thus, the totalitarian regime is able to maintain its power by sprinkling out small moments of control to the female population.

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred dreams of the time before, remembering her love for Luke and their daughter. During one dream, she notes that "nobody dies from lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from."¹⁰⁰ This idea of love, fought against by the Aunts, is what Foucault deemed a threat to a government's power. As long as love exists between two people, any rules that separate them will be defied. The reeducation centers promoted a hierarchical structure of men and women in which love did not exist; during the same dream, Offred says she would rather die than never feel Luke's touch again. Offred was not alone in this sentiment: "There were incidents in bathrooms at first: there were cuttings, drownings. Before they got all the bugs ironed out."¹⁰¹ The power of love is worth dying for, and death, in the absence of sexuality, is seen as a form of control by the women; the choice to live or end one's life is the only choice left to them, but even this is taken away by the conscious absence of resources to commit suicide.

These memories are the only link left between Offred and the time before, making them extremely dangerous to the Gileadean government. The only context available on

⁹⁹ Ibid., 307.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 103.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 62.

how the United States segued into Gilead comes from Offred's memory, a memory of "seeing political changes [that] is of necessity vague and fragmented."¹⁰² For most of the novel, memories of herself, Luke, and their daughter are the only reason she is able to keep her sanity and individuality in the face of mass and total suppression.

Love is not a factor in Gileadean relationships; the Commander questions Offred whether love was truly worth the cost¹⁰³, saying that Gilead eliminated love to protect the women, and Aunt Lydia distastefully dismisses the concept.¹⁰⁴ For Offred, however, love is the only point: her memories of love for Luke are what keep her sane as she navigates the society. Offred describes the feeling of love as "the way you understood yourself; if it never happened to you, not ever, you would be like a mutant, a creature from outer space. Everyone knew that."¹⁰⁵ Gilead does not take away the emotional ability of women to love; rather, it strips them of the ability to choose and be with their lover, forcing women to be celibate or a machine for reproduction. Even the Wives, who enjoy a remarkably higher social standing than other women, generally go unloved by their husbands due to arranged marriages; they serve only as a token of their husband's status.

The government realizes the power of memory and how it challenges their authority, as does Offred. Without knowledge of how society can be better, the present society can exist in a sort of vacuum, making the government's job easier. Aunt Lydia refers to Offred and the other women as a "transitional generation," saying that "it is the

¹⁰² Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 104.

¹⁰³ "We've given them more than we've taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery." – Atwood 219.

¹⁰⁴ Atwood, 220.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

hardest for you. We know the sacrifices that you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts.”¹⁰⁶ These “willing hearts” result from the complete immersion in the ideals of Gilead without ever knowing of the time before: “they will have no memories, of any other way.”¹⁰⁷

Atwood’s Prediction

In an interview with Canadian literary magazine *Quill and Quire*, Margaret Atwood, concerning *The Handmaid’s Tale*, famously stated “there’s nothing in the book that hasn’t already happened.”¹⁰⁸ Though Gilead may seem radically different from the United States, its foundation is planted firmly in contemporary political events and cultural attitudes. Placing Gilead’s future in our present will reveal just how realistic Atwood’s tale is. Analyzing current trends with those that allowed Gilead to overthrow the American political system will reveal that, if relevant upon its publication in 1985, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is even more socially relevant today, tying into changing ideas and a world prone to extremism.

Atwood has said that her dystopia is based on the American Puritans, who came to America to escape persecution, but immediately began persecuting others. Modern day preachers harkening back to those days in their speeches, along with the “rising fanaticism of the Iranian monotheocracy,” motivated Atwood to write *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a story that she said follows religious and gender sentiments to their logical

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 117.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Karen Stein, “Margaret Atwood’s Modest Proposal: The Handmaid’s Tale,” *Canadian Literature* 148 (1986): 64.

conclusion.¹⁰⁹ Atwood is adamant that *The Handmaid's Tale* represents a potential path for the United States future.

Gilead's rise went mostly unchallenged by the population due to a political apathy deeply ingrained in the culture and a general lack of protestation from a significant portion of the population. Part of this stemmed from the threat of friends and neighbors being Eyes for the government, and the risk of treason undermined every conversation. In a recent study from the Pew Research Center, only 19% of Millennials (ranging from 18 to 33 years old) say "most people can be trusted," a historic low; fighting oppressive powers requires trust among the dissenters, trust that emerging leaders do not have.¹¹⁰ Neither is the apathy that Atwood writes into *The Handmaid's Tale* absent in American culture: "Few Americans vote, many tell survey interviewers that they have little faith in the government, many are astonishingly ignorant about the most basic political issues: yet all are touched by this untrusted, ignored government."¹¹¹ If faced with a threat, there is still a chance the population will unite against it, but the general sentiments and feelings of Americans entering adulthood create the same foundation Gilead required. Gilead rose through a religious extremism that seems to have more place in colonial rather than contemporary America, but perhaps now more than ever, the religious climate has created the perfect environment for a traditionalist religion to step up. Atwood has said Gilead was inspired by Iran, and in the epilogue, Pieixoto references a later speech titled "Iran and Gilead: Two Late-Twentieth-Century Monotheocracies."¹¹² The

¹⁰⁹ "Reader's Companion to Handmaid's Tale," *Random House* (website), http://www.randomhouse.com/resources/bookgroup/handmaidstale_bgc.html.

¹¹⁰ "Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends," *Pew Research Center*, March 7, 2014, 7.

¹¹¹ Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

¹¹² Atwood, 300.

similarities are obvious: oppression of women, death penalty for perceived immoral acts, secret tortures and executions, etc. The rights that women had gained in Iran were reversed following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and their place in politics, the family, and the workplace became religiously dictated, and the Islamic Republic of Iran was born. Shari'a law was instituted in the courts and women were forced to wear the hejab, similar to the winged hoods the handmaids are forced to wear.¹¹³ Though women's role in society has improved since then, they are still subjugated to men, and trends do not show this changing.

This was 1985, however; is the idea of a religious theocracy still a threat, and even then, is it a threat to United States? Religious institutions are increasingly taking a role in American politics, most notably the Catholic Church and other religious groups fighting the Obama administration over distributing contraceptives under the United States' new health care law—echoing one of the causes of Gilead's rise. Priests are regularly preaching politics from the pulpit, instructing devotees how to vote in moral matters, but a recent poll found that 66% of Americans do not think churches should endorse candidates. In an age when political moderation is being left behind in favor of far-right politics, the far-right adopts religious reasons for regulating the activities of other American based on 'moral' issues. These 'moral' issues are the same ammunition that Gilead used to strip women of their rights and institute its overbearing dystopia. Margaret Atwood fully intended for *The Handmaid's Tale* to be interpreted as a warning for the path the United States is following, and many contemporary political, social, and cultural trends play into her warning. She offers this in an attempt to change this path, to

¹¹³ Louise Halper, "Law and Women's Agency in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 28 (2005), 85-86.

highlight where we went wrong so it can be rectified in time. The methods used to suppress women and facilitate the rise of Gilead are already present in our society; all Atwood did was take “certain casually held opinions about women . . . to their logical conclusion.”¹¹⁴ Inherent in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a slight theme of hope through Offred’s resilience to be being broken by the society. Atwood gives this hope so we can change our course; is there still time to fix the country to avoid living Offred’s fate, or are we already too far gone?

¹¹⁴ “Reader’s Companion.”

Conclusion

Could a utopian or dystopian society ever exist in our contemporary world?

Thomas More's and Margaret Atwood's speculations may seem far off, but these societies are much closer to reality than they appear. That More created a society in 1516 that still resonates today is startling; perhaps even more startling is that Atwood's society is coming closer and closer to fruition in modern America. While there is a distinction between a literary utopian or dystopian society and the physical realization of one, literature since its inception has reflected life, offering potential courses and paths—could the resurgence in the dystopian genre be a clue?

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