The Future of Motherhood

The Portrayal of Women and Mothers in Dystopian and Utopian Literature

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Abstract

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to contribute to research on women’s science fiction novels within gender studies, by examining the use of the dystopian and utopian genre in criticizing the traditional role of women in society. For this research, a close reading and analysis of Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* will be conducted with focus on the portrayal of women, especially in regard to how motherhood is present in the worlds created. For the purpose of this research, Piercy’s world is accepted as a utopia, while in contrast Atwood’s world is analysed as a dystopia. This thesis will argue that Piercy criticises the traditional role of women by challenging the gender binary in her novel. She achieves this by creating a utopian society with technology that enables both men and women to become mothers. It will also be argued that Atwood’s narrative is critical of the traditional role of women by objectifying the female characters, and specifically the Handmaids, in its dystopian society. This is accomplished by making Handmaids commodities, who are only valued for their wombs.

Keywords: gender studies, dystopia, utopia, science fiction, women’s writing, gynocriticism, Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy, motherhood, gender binary
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Introduction

Science fiction is a genre that has been used by authors to voice feminist theories and criticism, as the genre offers a speculative ground on which to create and experiment with different types of societies, leading to “a comprehensive breadth of innovation” (Makinen 129). Feminist authors have explored the science fiction genre, that of utopias and dystopias in particular, as a way to articulate their opinions and theories on the main debates surrounding feminism for a long time, early examples being *Mercia the Astronomer Royal* by Amelia Garland Mear and *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, published in 1895 and 1915 respectively. In her book *Feminist Popular Fiction* (2001), Merja Makinen states that, throughout the 1970s and the 1990s, the genre was used to further explore the then ongoing main discussions on feminist issues, with themes ranging “from ideal feminine communities, to the phallocentric dystopias; from explorations of the alien ‘other’, to questions of identity with the cyborg” (129). The utopias that were written during those years specifically offered new insights on the possibilities within the genre, as they moved “toward an open-endedness that sought to overcome the tendency toward monological stagnation that had long haunted conceptualizations of utopia” (Booker, “Woman on the Edge of a Genre” 338), meaning the works “where men are men and women are women, and in relatively conventional ways” (337), with characters conforming to traditional gender roles. Writers such as Marge Piercy, Joanna Ross, Margaret Atwood, Suzy McKee Charnas and Ursula K Le Guin wrote novels that display the possibilities of the genre in creating new images of the world concerning social and political issues such as gender and labour, thus moving away from the idea that the genre was only for male writers, and that the sci-fi written by women “failed to create new ways of imagining family scenes and love scenes” (Makinen 137). Their novels, among others, influenced the genre thus far that:

By the end of the 1970s, feminist criticism had moved from its initial criticism of the sexism in mainstream sf, to rediscover women’s presence in the history of the genre and to welcome the feminist appropriations of the 1970s with and awareness of sf’s subversive potential and its ability to envision a feminine experience, both in its representations and its discourse. (Makinen 139)

Feminist critics and writers no longer saw the genre as exclusively patriarchal and began to recognize the freedom and space the genre had to offer. Writers thus began to use the genre for the exploration of themes such as gender and equality, by creating new and experimental worlds that did not fit the patriarchal standard the genre had in the past.
The female experience is a crucial focal point in the critical reading of women’s writing, according to Elaine Showalter, who coined the term gynocriticism in the 1970s. In her article “Towards a Feminist Poetics”, she states that there is a need for “a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature” (28), as without it “we can miss or misinterpret the themes and structures of women’s literature, fail to make necessary connections within a tradition” (30). What she argued with this, was that the focus of feminist theorists and critics had been on works written by men and theories created by men, while they would achieve more by looking at women’s writing, in the attempt to learn about women in literature. Gynocriticism offered new models as a way of studying the female experience and putting the woman central, within “the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women” (Showalter 25).

Using science fiction, women have written about the female experience in multiple ways, both by looking at the non-fictional world as well as by creating fictional experiences in worlds they created. The contrasts or similarities created in doing so are a way in which female writers have been criticising society and the traditional role of women.

The focus of this research will be on the ability of the science fiction genre, specifically utopias and dystopias, to realize and portray the female experience, especially when it comes to motherhood, and how female characters are portrayed in the worlds created. Utopian works written by women often “develop new social forms based on equality of the sexes and on alternative forms of love relationships, living patterns, and parenting [, as women] are in full control of their reproductive functions” (Fitting 158). Dystopian works written by female authors often create worlds almost the exact opposite to those ideas, thus making both genres suitable for examining the female experience in these types of worlds, especially in comparison to the traditional role of women. The question that will be answered with this research is: In what way is the dystopia or utopia in Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time (1976) and Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985) used to criticise the traditional role patterns of women, specifically regarding motherhood? The research will consist of a close reading of the two novels within the framework of gender studies. It will be based on Elaine Showalter’s gynocriticism, as the focus of the analyses will be on the female experience, in combination with Peter Fitting’s article “‘So We All Became Mothers’: New Roles for Men in Recent Utopian Fiction” and Merja Makinen’s book Feminist Popular Fiction. The intention of this research, however, is to focus on the female characters within the works, and thus to deviate from Showalter’s focus on the author’s experience. This choice
has been made to be able to focus on the authors’ use of the genre as a way of portraying gender and motherhood in new, innovative ways, as the two works each explore these themes. 

*Woman on the Edge of Time* poses a new vision of motherhood in a utopian setting, by making reproduction an essential, yet optional part of the society in the novel, with new potential ways to birth children, while *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be seen as a warning of what is to come for women, or in other words, potential mothers, when infertility threatens humanity and a totalitarian regime takes over the ways of reproduction.

This bachelor thesis will consist of three main and a concluding chapter. The first chapter will go into detail on the science fiction genre, more specifically utopias and dystopias. It will give a general overview of how the genre has been used by, mostly female, authors to discuss gender issues and feminist theories. The second part of the chapter will be on the theoretical framework used to analyse the two works, by using a combination of close reading and gynocriticism. The second chapter will be an analysis of Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* and will discuss how Piercy has made an attempt at creating an equal world without gender binaries for men and women by making reproduction outside of the woman’s body. The third chapter will consist of an analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood, and will discuss how infertility changes motherhood in Atwood’s regime, leading to the objectification of women. A concluding chapter will bring the analyses of the novels together to provide an answer to the research question of this bachelor thesis.
Chapter 1

Without an understanding of the framework of the female subculture, we can miss or misinterpret the themes and structures of women’s literature, fail to make necessary connections within a tradition. (Showalter 30)

In starting this research, it is necessary to give some information on the topic of science fiction and more specifically provide a definition, or description in this case, of the terms utopia and dystopia. Within this first chapter, there will thus be a paragraph on the genres utopia and dystopia, followed by a brief explanation of how the science fiction genre became of great importance within feminist movements and among women writers and theorists alike. This part of the chapter is mostly based on the chapter “Science Fiction” from Merja Makinen’s *Feminist Popular Fiction* (2001). The chapter will conclude by giving an explanation of gynocriticism, which will provide the basis of the analysis presented in this thesis.

A utopia is commonly accepted to refer to a fictional place that presents a world better than, or an ideal version of, the non-fictional world. As Sarah LeFanu puts it; “the original meaning of utopia is an especially fruitful one: utopia as an imaginary place, a nowhere land, a realm like the unconscious, where dreams may flourish and desires be realised” (58). The creation of a utopia is, in general, a way to look for an opposite to the non-fictional world, changing the aspects that are not wanted by the author and leaving the ones that are. A dystopia, then, is often explained as being the opposite of a utopia, namely a world that is not at all ideal, but terrifying and often full of violence and secrecy. In their book *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, Michael Gordin, Helen Tilley and Gyan Prakash argue it is not simply utopia’s opposite, as they state that for a world to be the exact opposite of a utopia, it would need to be “completely unplanned or . . . planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful. . . . rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society” (2). It therefore happens often that a dystopian society appears to be a utopia in the beginning of a novel, as not all parts of the world are dysfunctional and dehumanizing, which for example is the case in the classic *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. As is common with dystopian novels, the society in Huxley’s novel seems to be a good place in the first part of the narrative, and seems utopian in its structure, but later turns out to be not so ideal, and even horrifying thus becoming a dystopia. Gordin, Tilley and Prakash argue that though the two genres appear to be each other’s opposites, an overarching element between the utopia and the dystopia is the ability to “seek
to alter the social order on a fundamental, systemic level [and by doing so] address root causes and offer revolutionary solutions” (2). An important difference within this element of similarity is that a utopia is often a far-away future that tends to try to motivate the reader to work towards that bright future. Contrastingly, a dystopia then is a future world that points directly at the most dark and prominent problems of the non-fictional world that will cause that certain dark future to be its result if there is no change for the better (Gordin, et al. 2).

Both dystopia and utopia are subgenres within science fiction. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following definition for the term science fiction: “fiction in which the setting and story feature hypothetical scientific or technological advances, the existence of alien life, space or time travel, etc., esp. such fiction set in the future, or an imagined alternative universe” (“Science Fiction”). Science fiction has been described as a very suitable genre for women writers, by writers and theorists alike, who will be discussed in the next paragraph of this chapter. A brief overview of the development of the genre among women is necessary, to provide an understanding of the reason for this genre, and thus also utopia and dystopia, being a suitable literary form to write in for women writers, or specifically feminist authors.

The science fiction genre is generally held to begin in the nineteenth century, as the industrial revolution made people question technological advancements and literacy among people expanded. Merja Makinen states that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Last Man* (1826) are considered to be the first within the genre; the first being an exploration of technology and its dangers, and the latter being a novel on a plague effacing Europe (130). From the very beginning, the genre was used as a way “to raise questions about society, in relation to technology” (Makinen 131), Mary Shelley bringing a start to the genre’s form of social critique, and writers such as H.G. Wells responding to that by bringing new debates into their narratives. The start of the socially critical utopian novel lies with American writer Edward Bellamy, and though British writers began with writing such novels a few years earlier, his *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888) “was easily the most influential” (Makinen 131) and the inspiration for utopian novels published years after. Among the writers who challenged Bellamy’s novel on the topic of his socialist ideals, were a group of American female authors who wrote utopian fiction, such as Mary Bradley Lane and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. They were writers during the first wave of feminism in the United States at the turning point of the twentieth century, and, as Makinen states, amongst the first to voice “their critique of patriarchal marriage and lack of equality” (132) in a science fiction novel. Women writers continued to use the genre to write about possible futures and technological advances,
but from the 1940s up until the 1950s these mostly concerned themselves with the home. The women writers who wrote science fiction novels during this time were mostly conforming to the patriarchal ideals of the genre and thus did not challenge the gender binaries or stereotypes of family life. In general, the novels written around the 1940s and 1950s were about housewives who, Makinen argues, “stumbled ignorantly through their adventures, thereby reinforcing the stereotypes of feminine domesticity being promulgated after the war, to get women out of the factories and back into the home” (134). A decade later, in 1962, Naomi Mitchison brought a change to that tradition by writing Memoir of a Spacewoman, a novel which includes a female protagonist who is a biologist that experiments with her own body to find new ways of reproduction. The novel was a leap forward after the conforming novels of the two decades before. It was followed in the same decade by female writers, “many of whom were to become the vanguard of feminist sf: Kate Wilhelm, Anne McCaffrey, Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin” (Makinen 135). According to Pamela Sargent, it is the change to more freedom in writing and focus on fully-formed female characters and individuality that explains the growth in women authors during this time (Makinen 135).

Shulasmith Firestone, a feminist theorist, also sparked the use of the genre for feminist critique, when her book The Dialectic of Sex: the Case for Feminist Revolution was published in 1971. She argued that technology had the possibility of becoming a catalyst in breaking apart the nuclear family and lead the way to more personal freedom, as it offered new ways of reproduction (Makinen 136). According to her, utopian novels were the way to move forwards, as these would be the inspiration for scientific discoveries that, in turn, would help create new kinds of families, but there had been none written by feminists to inspire such change (Makinen 136-137). Firestone was not the only one to declare that feminist science fiction novels should be written to challenge the patriarch, as it would be the most fitting literary genre for that use. In her essay “The Image of Women in Science Fiction” (1971), Joanna Russ wrote that though it could be assumed that science fiction would be the perfect literary mode in which to explore (and explode) our assumptions about ‘innate’ values and ‘natural’ social arrangements. . . . [S]peculation about the innate personality differences between men and women, about family structure, about sex, in short about gender roles, does not exist at all. (LeFanu 17)

Though women writers had tried to create new and more female characters in their stories, Joanna Russ was of the opinion that they had never challenged or experimented with traditional roles and rules in the family home, so that it stayed within the patriarchal norms of
society. In her later essay “What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can’t Write”, Russ continued with this argument by stating that women writers could not write female characters that were fully-formed, as the mainstream form of writing prevented them from doing so. She stated that “the alternative [to writing patriarchal stereotypes within the mainstream literature] was to look to fiction that did not reproduce phallocentric plots, such as the detective story where the focus is on the puzzle rather than the hero, supernatural fiction, and science fiction” (Makinen 137). The science fiction genre thus became both more popular as well as “seen more positively” (Makinen 137), after Firestone and Russ took it upon themselves to challenge women writers to use it to its full potential and experiment with it.

The potential of the science fiction genre became clear for more feminist writers from the 1960s onwards, and after Joanna Russ’s essay and Shulasmith Firestone’s book, multiple women writers such as Russ herself, Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood and Ursula Le Guin wrote in the genre to rectify the lack of speculation that Russ had pointed out. Although there had been some women writers who explored the genre and its purpose for pointing out gender issues before, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* in 1915, “the 1970s did see a great change in the representation of women in science fiction” (LeFanu 22). The second wave of feminism was one of the reasons for the growth of the representation of women in fiction, as writers used the genre as a way to voice the issues most prominent in the movement. As Sarah LeFanu states in her book *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (2012):

One of the major theoretical projects of the second wave of feminism is the investigation of gender and sexuality as social constructs, thus posing a challenge to notions of a natural law regulating feminine behaviour and an innate femaleness that describes and circumscribes ‘woman’. . . . The stock conventions of science fiction – time travel, alternate worlds, entropy, relativism, the search for a unified field theory – can be used metaphorically and metonymically as powerful ways of exploring the construction of ‘woman’. Feminist SF, then, is part of science fiction while struggling against it. (11)

The science fiction novel was thus used to explore new ‘types of women’, question gender binaries and create different societies where the ideals of the feminist movement could take place. LeFanu states that feminist science fiction was “struggling against” the genre, as the writers had to work against the patriarchal form the genre had received over the years, with writers staying within the traditional lines of the gender binaries, and thus create a new form
away from “the male bias” (11). In spite of this struggle, LeFanu also states that the science fiction genre offered women a new way of writing, and most remarkable according to her, was “the fluidity of form that SF allows” (12), giving the writer the freedom and space to create and experiment in every way.

By the end of the 1970s, the science fiction genre was thus welcomed and approved by feminists, as they had become aware of its “subversive potential and its ability to envision a feminine experience, both in its representations and its discourse” (Makinen 139). The female experience had gotten the attention of both writers and theorists during this time. A reason for this shift of attention was Elaine Showalter, who wrote about the necessity of a theory that, “in contrast to this angry or loving fixation on male literature” (28), would focus on women’s writing, in her essay “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979). This theory, which she coined gynocriticism, would then only look at the experience of women and focus “on the newly visible world of female culture” (Showalter 28). The necessity of a theory that would aim attention at women writers was made clear by her with the following statement: “If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be” (Showalter 27). With models based on gynocriticism, feminist theory would move away from the literary theories dominated by men and used for male writers, to create a new way of analysing women’s literature. In answering the research question of this bachelor thesis, a model “based on the study of female experience” (Showalter 28) will be used by analysing and close reading the female characters and their experiences within the novels. Though Showalter might not have meant it as literally as that, this research will be looking at a “world of female culture”, as created by Piercy and Atwood in their novels, to create an understanding of the women within dystopias and utopias, as described with the quote at the beginning of this chapter.

To conclude, for the analyses of the novels the definitions of utopias and dystopias stated in this chapter will be used, as well as the knowledge of the use of the science fiction genre by feminists. Alongside that, the close reading and analyses of the two novels will be based on gynocriticism by Elaine Showalter, to provide an answer to the research question and add to the research on women in science fiction novels. In the upcoming two chapters, the analyses will focus on the main characters in the narratives and their female experiences within the world created by the author.
Chapter 2

The utopian genre allows the writer to create worlds that sharply contrast with the non-fictional world and to experiment with new social structures and systems in a society. As described in the first chapter, the genre attracts the attention of many feminist writers and theorists, because it enables the author to create a world away from or opposite to what already exists. In his article “‘So We All Became Mothers’: New Roles for Men in Recent Utopian Fiction”, Peter Fitting states that “one of the features of [the second wave of feminism] was a renewed interest in what a world without sexual exploitation and domination would actually look and feel like, and how men and women might live together according to new social and sexual relationships” (156). This interest led to, mostly female, writers exploring the possibilities of fictional worlds with those exact qualities. Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* is one of the novels published during this wave, as it was first published in 1976. This chapter will examine how the portrayal of the women and the social structure in the fictional world of Mattapoissett can be interpreted as criticism on the traditional role patterns of women, continuing the discussion that was started by Peter Fitting in his article from 1985.

*Woman on the Edge of Time* tells the story of the main character Connie Ramos, who is a thirty-seven-year-old woman in America in the 1970s. She is oppressed by society – especially as a Mexican American – and mistreated by the people in her life, which leads to her being impoverished and unhealthy. In the beginning of the novel, her niece’s pimp abuses her and then has her committed to a mental hospital to have her out of his way. In the hospital, Connie tries to receive proper care by explaining to the nurses that she has been abused and has broken her ribs, but they do not listen to her. In time, it becomes clear that Connie had been committed to the same mental hospital before and was then labelled mad and depressed by the doctors. That time, she ended up in the hospital after abusing her only child, Angelina, whilst intoxicated and trying to recover from her husband’s death. The child is already taken away from her for a while before the narrative begins, but Connie thinks of her often throughout the plot and feels regret for how she mistreated her daughter. Throughout the rest of the novel, Connie’s life in the mental hospital does not improve, as a doctor decides she is a suitable candidate for an experiment. The experiment involves a procedure where an implant is placed in her brain, which then is supposed to enable the doctors to turn on and off her violent impulses. While Connie struggles in the mental hospital in the 1970s, Luciente tries to contact her. Luciente comes from the year 2137 and explains that Connie is a ‘catcher’
which enables Luciente to visit her. It is never fully explained how the travelling works, but it is presented as mental transportation through both of their minds. The first few visits from Luciente result in Connie starting to travel back and forth between her world in 1970s America and the town called Mattapoisett, in 2137. The narrative is told from Connie’s perspective, so that the reader experiences Mattapoisett with her for the first time. As Connie explores Mattapoisett, she learns that it is a town where everyone is equal and men and women are very much alike, in both behaviour and looks. Problems of racism, homophobia, environmental pollution, consumerism and totalitarianism do not exist or have been solved. The people in Mattapoisett have a different way of living and even a different way of reproducing. Connie’s first reaction to multiple aspects of Mattapoisett is one of horror and disgust - as will become clear throughout this analysis - but in the end changes into respect and understanding for a place that she comes to love. Piercy sharply contrasts Connie’s life in the 1970s with the utopian world she envisions by presenting the reader with Connie’s reality first. As Carol Pearson states in her article “Women’s Fantasies and Feminist Utopias”, this is a characteristic of many writers of feminist utopian fiction, as they “usually begin by showing how women are profoundly alienated and limited by patriarchal society; they then go on to acquaint the reader with an alternative society in which women could feel at home and manifest their potential” (50). As Connie travels back and forth, the setting continually changes from the 1970s to the twenty-second century, thus sharply contrasting both during the entire narrative. Piercy’s aim with this seems to be to make the difference harsh and undeniable. Peter Fitting states that Piercy has “extensive critique of contemporary patriarchal forms” through the depiction of Connie’s life, as “she grounds masculine behaviour in the social structures and practices of capitalism” (169). What Fitting means with this is that Connie’s situation in life is all ultimately caused by the men in her family, as “it is her niece's pimp who has her committed to the hospital, and it is her brother who refuses to sign the papers to have her released” (169). Piercy creates an image of the society Connie lives in “that is already a dystopia for marginal members of society like [Connie]” (Booker, “Woman on the Edge of a Genre 33). Keith Booker argues that “[Piercy] then contrasts this dystopian America with an ideal 22nd-century utopia based on tolerance, nurturing, communality, ecological responsibility, and the complete effacement of conventional gender differences” (“Woman on the Edge of a Genre” 339). Marcy Piercy has thus envisioned two types of worlds in her novel, a dystopian 1970s America and a utopian twenty-second century America.
In Piercy’s utopia, it is fully possible to say that men and women are created as equals. One of the reasons that makes full equality possible is that Piercy’s world is one without gender binaries. The gender binary is a model based on the notion that sex and gender can be classified into two distinct opposites, namely feminine and masculine. Piercy makes changes to both the traditional role of women, as well as of the men in Mattapoisett, by eliminating and adding aspects to her society that would make the traditional binary structure of society no longer necessary or even possible, for example by changing reproduction. In her article, Carol Pearson argues that writers of feminist utopias have often found it necessary to eliminate the gender binary, since “the belief in duality and the essential conflict between opposites characteristically is seen as the failure of patriarchy, which necessitates its destruction” (57). As Pearson explains, authors of feminist utopias have used different approaches to create a world without gender roles and a binary system. One element in the novel that allows for a world without the gender binary is Piercy’s fundamental change to the English language. In his article, Peter Fitting argues that language is a “recurrent theme” within feminist novels, as it is recognised “that the forms and practices of discourse are socially produced and contribute to the maintenance of the status quo” (164). In other words, language is a very important element in forming someone’s view of the world and maintaining social ideas such as binarism. “The generic term man, for instance, implicitly equates ‘people’ with ‘male people,’ while women are “represented in discourse as a secondary sex, differentiated from an implied male norm” (Fitting 164-165). Piercy gives an alternative in her novel to the issue of gendered pronouns by using the pronouns ‘person’ and ‘per’ instead of the gender sensitive ‘he, she, his’ and ‘her’. As a result, Piercy underscores that gender is not important to the people of Mattapoisett, but is also critical of the non-fictional world in how it maintains the status quo of putting a gender on the people, and the objects for that matter, surrounding us. Through Mattapoisett, she shows that it is not necessary to use gender sensitive pronouns, as it is possible to use neutral pronouns instead.

Though the change in the use of pronouns is crucial in Piercy’s world, the most important aspect for breaking the gender binary in Mattapoisett is making both men and women nurturing beings who can become mothers. This is made possible in the novel by technological advancement, as the people in Mattapoisett have a machine they call “the brooder”, introduced on page 93 when Luciente shows Connie the building where the machine is installed. At first, this machine is described as if a scene in a horror movie, as Connie’s first reaction to it is one of terror and disgust:
Connie gaped, her stomach also turning slowly upside down. All in a sluggish row, babies bobbed. Mother the machine. Like fish in the aquarium at Coney Island. Their eyes were closed. . . . Languidly they drifted in a blind school. (Piercy 94)

Since the novel is told from Connie’s perspective, her reaction may influence the reader’s opinion of the brooder. However, through the characters from Mattapoisett, Piercy also states clearly what the advancement would entail for humankind. Bee, the man minding the babies that are growing in the machine, tries to explain the importance of this change to a horrified Connie by saying:

It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally, there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding. (Piercy 97)

Mattapoisett is a nurturing, matriarchal society as a result of this machine. The importance given to gender differs greatly from the society that Connie lives in, or the non-fictional world for that matter, because males are given the same ability as women; to become a mother. The ability for everyone to experience motherhood and the fact that they raise children with three mothers, means that the binary system does not exist in its society. Men are no longer fathers, and women are not the only mothers. As a result, women do not have to go through pregnancy, and do not get physically weakened or tested, but can still become mothers, just like men. The citizens of Mattapoisett manipulate the growth of the population by controlling the brooders and choosing when to bring new children into the world. By controlling the birthing times of children and the assigning of mothers to each child, “children are never illegitimate, because they all have mothers” (Pearson 51). The responsibility for child care is never on one person alone, as the people in Mattapoisett divide the care over each child over three mothers. In doing so, Piercy not only demolishes the concept that child care, again, is a binary system where a mother and a father are responsible for a child, but also moves away from the idea that there is one parent, the mother, who is the primary care taker who nurtures and feeds the child, as there will always be three who do so.

After the introduction of the brooder in the novel, Connie is raging with anger and confusion at the thought of men being able to call themselves mothers. She even is astonished
that women think to call themselves mothers after having received a baby grown in a machine. The knowledge that Mattapoisett assigns three mothers to each child makes her remember her own experiences with her own child, Angelina. She wonders whether Angelina would have been better off with three mothers, but also remembers how it felt to have her in the following quote:

    Angelina, child of my sore and bleeding body, child of my sad marriage that never fit right, like a pair of cheap shoes that sprouts a nail in the sole. But you fit right. . . . How could anyone know what being a mother means who has never carried a child nine months heavy under her heart, who has never borne a baby in blood and pain, who has never suckled a child. Who got that child out of a machine the way that couple, white and rich, got my flesh and blood. All made up already, a canned child, just add money. What do they know of motherhood? (Piercy 98)

Connie’s ideas of motherhood clash with Mattapoisett, as she sees it as something that is exclusively for women and she takes pride in having those qualities herself. She feels that the men in Mattapoisett have claimed the only thing that really made women who they are and what they stand for in life. Seeing that men can get hormones to be able to breastfeed the babies, Connie’s feelings are strengthened:

    Yes, how dare any man share that pleasure. These women thought they had won, but they had abandoned to men the last refuge of women. What was special about being a woman here? They had given it all up, they had let men steal from them the last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and in milk. (Piercy 126)

Connie’s respect for the women in Mattapoisett vanishes almost entirely after learning how they breastfeed their babies, but she also pities them because of it. Connie’s reaction is a critical view on the way women are perceived in society, as her acquired idea of women is that they are beings who are only good for nurturing. She is of the opinion that they only have that one aspect to be proud of in life, as it is “the last refuge” that sets them apart from men. It seems that by creating the contrasting ideals between Connie and Mattapoisett’s people, Piercy tries to show how deeply ingrained the gender binaries are within society, even for someone like Connie, who has suffered tremendously because of it.

    Luciente and the other people from Mattapoisett try to convince Connie to see that the changes are positive ones, as they show her how they love and take care of their children. Luciente explains that at least two mothers nurse each baby, so that they have enough milk for
each one. They find this of importance, as they “suspect loving and sensual enjoyment are rooted in being held and sucking and cuddling” (Piercy 127). Thus breastfeeding, among other aspects related to motherhood, become part of society in the sense that they are not reserved for women only, to take pride in and to create a difference between men and women. Rather, they have become a crucial part of a nurturing society that does what is best for its children, without imposing tasks on anyone. In her novel, Piercy has developed “new social forms based on equality of the sexes and on alternative forms of love relationships, living patterns, and parenting. Women are in full control of their reproductive functions, and there is an acceptance of diverse forms of sexual expression, most particularly of homosexuality” (Fitting 158). The family home is redefined, as Piercy presents the reader with “new forms of intimate personal relationships and interaction centered on collective ideals and goals . . . Child-rearing . . . becomes a collective enterprise” (Fitting 165-166) performed by three mothers and children are given much more independence at the age of twelve. Child-rearing not only is the responsibility of those three assigned mothers, but of everyone in Mattapoisett. When they are visiting one of the houses where the babies are cared for, Luciente explains to Connie that not all the cribs in the home are filled with sleeping babies, as they are taken along by anyone, mothers or others, who wants to bring them. She states; “Oftentimes when we’re working, we take the baby in a backpack. When breast-feeding ends, everybody who feels like it lugs them around” (Piercy 127). The entire society thus become centred on child-rearing. As is stated in the novel through the character Bee, quoted earlier in this chapter, what Piercy implies with this new way of looking at motherhood is that by sharing the ability to become a mother with men, society will finally be able to become fully equal and children will become the focal point. Piercy is critical of how women’s traditional role in life is that of primary nurturer and through offering a vision of a world where that is different, implies that child-care should be divided more evenly.

Another aspect that allows Mattapoisett to be without gender binaries is how gender is perceived by its citizens. Piercy shows that there is no reason in Mattapoisett to have clear divisions between sexes, as everyone can play every part in society they want to be in. A statement Luciente makes repeatedly throughout the novel is; “Person must not do what person cannot do” (Piercy 93). This almost becomes a motto for the people of Mattapoisett, as all their ideas on how a person should fill in their life fit within that statement. The impact this ideal has, becomes especially clear from an instance between Luciente and Connie. In the following quote, they are discussing a woman who is the head of a house where children live:
“Magdalena has no family. Person want this instead. Person is chaste and solitary among adults,” Luciente said . . . “You mean an old maid?” “I don’t know this term. You speak it with contempt?” “Yeah, it’s an insult. A woman who can’t get a man.” “Connie, we don’t get each other. And we respect people who don’t want to couple.” (Piercy 129)

With this instance in the story, Piercy is critical of the way women are perceived in the non-fictional world, as it is expected of them to marry and get children, or they will be called “an old maid”. Their traditional role in life is to become a mother, and different decisions in life are frowned upon. Again, Piercy uses Connie’s attitude to contrast the traditional role of women in her society and the non-fictional world with the customs of Mattapoisett, where everyone is free to decide what is best for them, instead of having to live according to certain standards and expectations based on their gender. There is thus no expectation on women to become mothers, as everyone is free to choose. Since parenting is no longer based on the traditional process of reproduction between a man and a woman, but is a process with machines and then continues by assigning three people who are all mothers, there is no need for the gendered words that divide roles. The word ‘mother’ no longer implies a female who gave birth to a baby and thus the primary nurturer in a family with a father, but a nurturer who decided to take care of a child until it gets to the age of twelve. ‘Father’ is no longer used, not only because there is no importance given to the biological parents of children, but also since the role is no longer there, especially as traditional provider for the family. Since everyone in Mattapoisett works together to be able to live a comfortable life, there is not one person who has the task of providing for the family.

By building Mattapoisett into a world where gender is not of importance, Piercy creates a vision of a world that shows that gender is a social construct, and that it is different from a person’s biological sex. This concept correlates with Simone de Beauvoir’s statement; “one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman” (267), from her book The Second Sex. What is meant with this quote, and the idea that gender is a social construct, is that it is not the biological sex that determines whether someone behaves what is seen as traditionally feminine. Rather, it is culture that shapes how people perceive their environment and everyone in it, ultimately affecting the way they see and form themselves. It is clear from early on in the novel that Piercy agrees with this statement and is critical of the way women are socially constructed to behave. She shows through the characters from Mattapoisett that without this social construct of gender, people would be different from how they are in the
non-fictional world. This notion can be perceived for the first time in the novel from how
Connie perceives Luciente. When first meeting her, Connie thinks of her as a man. However,
after noticing that she has breasts, she is shocked to hear Luciente is a woman. This surprises
her, since Luciente is much leaner than the women she knows. Most importantly however,
Connie expected her to be a man because of how she comes across:

Luciente spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unself-conscious authority Connie
associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did.
She squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never thinking about how her body was
displayed. (Piercy 59)

This extract from the novel shows that Luciente moves in, what we perceive as, a masculine
way and speaks openly and with authority, because she is not expected to behave a certain
way as a woman. The traditional role that is put upon women from a young age is not present
in Mattapoisett and thus she does not feel the need to restraint herself in her movement or
speech in any way. Through Luciente and Magdalena, Piercy thus shows that without the
social construct for women in a patriarchal society, they would be able to behave and act more
freely. She thus makes the reader question the notions of femininity and see that
“womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of
masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” (36), as Joan
Riviere argues in her article “Womanliness as Masquerade”. Piercy not only shows how
gender is a social construct through the female characters in her novel, but also through the
male characters. As mentioned before, the men in Mattapoisett are attributed, what is
traditionally known as, feminine traits, such as becoming a mother or breastfeeding a baby.
However, alongside that, Piercy also shows how men are not constrained in a world like
Mattapoisett through instances where emotions are shown openly, by men and women both.
Connie at first is almost disgusted by the openness with which men show their emotions, but
mostly she is surprised to see it when walking into a common room where people dine:

[A] man with a mustache was weeping openly into his soup and all about him people
were patting his shoulders and making a big fuss. . . . Really, this could be a dining
room in a madhouse, the way people sat naked with their emotions pouring out, but
there was a strong energy level there. (Piercy 66-67)

Piercy makes clear that by allowing men to show their emotions, they will feel liberated.
Through showing gender as a social construct, Piercy demonstrates how a world could work
without traditional gender roles and binarism. The result for Mattapoisett is free and happy people, who live according to their needs and dreams, not to fulfil expectations.

In conclusion, Marge Piercy criticises the traditional role of women by envisioning a world where women and men are each other’s equals in experimental, and thus far impossible, ways. She achieves this by creating new ways of reproducing and changing the language spoken, with the result that gender is not as apparent in society. Piercy uses the genre to its full potential by providing her utopia with technology that would mean more freedom for its citizens. At the heart of this is the brooder, which enables Mattapoisett to become a nurturing environment full of mothers.
Chapter 3

The previous chapter examined how the utopian genre can be used to move away from the traditional role of women and to explore female independence, by detaching from ‘the burden’ of reproduction. This is a characteristic of the genre that is the opposite of how women’s dystopias have been used, as they tend to underline “the denial of women’s sexual autonomy” (LeFanu 75). Instead of posing alternatives that will improve the quality of life in a society, as utopias aim to do, authors build on issues and fears from the non-fictional world to create their dystopias. In her book *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction*, Sarah LeFanu argues that feminist dystopias “show women trapped by their sex, by their femaleness and reduced from subjecthood to function” (75). Margaret Atwood shows women in precisely this situation in her novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, by exploring what a world would look like if infertility would impair human reproduction. Rosemary Sullivan describes that a collection of papers collected by Atwood suggests the inspiration for writing on infertility:

[The large file contains] newspaper clippings about a scientific obsession in the mid-1980s – INFERTILITY. Scientists were claiming that the chemical pollution in the environment was damaging the human reproductive system and soon the West, the so-called First World, would experience catastrophic declines in the birth rate. There were also newspaper and magazine clippings on cults, and on environmental pollutants like lead poisoning, toxic dumps, Agent Orange, and PCBs. The clippings had headlines like “IUD TIED TO INFERTILITY,” “THE BREEDING CRISIS IN THE WEST,” “SEXUAL ENGINEERING AND THE SUPER-RACE CHILDREN LEFT AFTER HITLER’S DEATH,” “16,500 FETUSES TO GET BURIAL IN THE U.S.” (850)

People’s fear of infertility thus inspired Margaret Atwood to write her novel in 1985 and to explore what the consequences of infertility would be on a society. This resulted in the creation of a feminist dystopia where fertile women become commodities. Though Atwood does not consistently describe herself as a feminist, and has stated that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not intended as feminist novel (Loudermilk 125), her narrative is in line with works from feminist writers of the time. Keith Booker states that:

in the context of a 1980s America dominated by Reagan-Bush conservative politics and highlighted (if that is the word) by the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment,
feminist writers found it more and more difficult to see better times ahead. . . .

[F]eminist visions of the future tended in general to show a dark turn in the 1980s, probably due to political reverses that damped the feminist optimism of the 1970s. (“Woman on the Edge of a Genre” 339)

The utopias from the 1970s thus made way for women’s dystopias in the 1980s, of which Atwood’s “almost purely dystopian” (Booker, “Woman on the Edge of a Genre” 339) novel is one. This chapter will examine how the objectification of the women and the system of reproduction in Gilead can be interpreted as a critique on the traditional role of women in the non-fictional world.

Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* presents an image of the United States in the near future, and is told from the perspective of the 33-year-old Handmaid from the title, who the reader knows as Offred. The novel depicts a world, named the Republic of Gilead, in which the infertility rate is immense – the ‘why’ of this is not precisely given in the novel, though it appears to be caused mostly by pollution –, and an extreme religious right has gained complete control. This results in a conservative regime that follows the Christian Bible and forms its laws according to the teachings of this bible. However, it is a version they rewrite and reinterpret according to their needs. Everyone is assigned a role within a category, which are all based on Gilead’s teachings from the Bible. The women are not allowed to read or write and are reduced to their traditional functions, or what are seen as “the ‘natural’ roles of homemaker and baby-maker” (Loudermilk 125), divided over a number of different categories. There are Wives, whose role it is to be a companion to their husband and to make sure the house is in order. Marthas are the women who are the cooks and housemaids of a household. Aunts are the women who enforce the laws and teach the Handmaids what their role is – which is why they are allowed to read certain texts –. Econowives are women who are of a low status and have to be all of the above mentioned categories at once, as there is no money for the family to divide them. Then most importantly in the novel and this analysis, there are the Handmaids, whose sole purpose in Gilead it is to bear children. “The Handmaid is a breeder only, and if she fails to produce a child within a certain period of time, she is declared an ‘Unwoman’ and exiled to the Colonies where she is forced to perform hard and life-threatening labor” (Loudermilk 126). Unwomen are the very last category of women in Gilead, but also the only category of women that are not seen in this novel. They are unimportant, as Gilead’s attitude towards these women seems to be that there is no purpose to them being in its society, or alive even, because they do not fulfil a woman’s role, and
therefore are called non-women. In her book *Fictional Feminism: How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women’s Equality*, Kim Loudermilk argues that though men are also put into categories in Gilead, this is within “a culture based on a conservative reading of the Christian Bible . . . [so they are assigned powerful masculine roles, and thus] become Commanders, Guardians, and Angels” (125). Commanders are the ones in power, and are therefore given more rights and freedom than the other men in Gilead.

In her novel, Atwood reshapes the Christian custom of marriage into a social ideal that can be achieved by all men through gaining the proper social status. Men are motivated to adhere to Gilead’s laws and in return they are rewarded with Wives, who are women chosen for their good breeding. Women thus are “issued to successful males as rewards for loyal service to the community, demonstrating the thorough commodification of women in Gilead” (Booker, *Dystopian Literature* 78). The women in the other categories are also offered to men with a high social status only. Handmaids are granted as rewards when the Commander’s Wife cannot provide him with offspring. Since the entire narrative is a collection of tapes and recollections from the main character Offred’s perspective, it is evident that she is very aware of the role she has in Gilead and in the household of the Commander:

> We are for breeding purposes: we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favours are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no toeholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. (Atwood 146)

By making women actual commodities in Gilead, Atwood appears to be criticising the objectification of women in the non-fictional world, especially in how this is accepted and ingrained in society. In his book *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, Keith Booker argues that Atwood is also “[s]uggesting the paucity of roles available to women in our own contemporary world, [through the women in Gilead who] exist not as individuals but as members of well-defined groups, corresponding almost to brand names” (78). The recurring argument for the system in Gilead is that women are now safer than before – which seems to be a world that equals the non-fictional world in the 1970s and 80s – because they are better protected by society. However, the result of the supposed improvement of women’s safety is that they have become further objectified and that this is now also stated in the law of the Republic of Gilead instead of solely ingrained within its culture.
Through the language of the novel, Offred’s experiences as an objectified woman in Gilead are directly depicted, and thus strengthen Atwood’s criticism on the objectification of women. Atwood explores language in *The Handmaid’s Tale* through narrative technique, as she presents it as a collection of recordings made by Offred. Offred’s account of the events that happen to her is not reliable, however, as Offred expresses multiple times that the story she is telling might not be completely true: “This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction” (Atwood 144). She states herself that she is telling a story: the recollections of what happened to her before and during the Republic of Gilead. In the following quote, she expresses the feeling that she is telling a story instead of living her own life:

I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off. It isn’t a story I’m telling. It’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along. Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it’s a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else. Even when there is no one. (Atwood 49)

This passage not only gives more insight into the narrative technique Atwood is using in her novel, but also raises awareness of Offred’s feelings and is thus used to amplify the female experience illustrated in the novel. This instance encompasses the loneliness, the despair, but also the hope that Offred feels. Offred’s life has become completely out of her control and the society she lives in has changed in its entirety in a matter of years – this is evident from Offred’s recollections from before Gilead’s existence –, so that she only has her hopes and dreams to escape to. Her experiences in Gilead traumatising her and leave her feeling confused and disoriented, which she feels she needs to express through telling her story.

The objectification of all women in Gilead continues through their clothing, as everyone is dressed in a uniform that fits their category. This creates immediate visibility of an individual’s status and what rights come with that. Offred describes her uniform as a Handmaid as follows:

Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts,
the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. (Atwood 18)

The Handmaids are dressed in constricting clothing which precludes their faces and bodies from being seen, further reinforcing Offred’s observation that they are only “two-legged wombs”. The Wives have more freedom of movement in their blue well-made dresses, while the dresses of the Marthas are described as having a dull green, and the Aunts are clothed in conservative brown uniforms. The impact of the dress code on day-to-day life in Gilead is clarified through an instance where a Handmaid, who then still has her own name Moira, temporarily assumes the role of an Aunt by dressing as one to escape the premises of the institute where they are taught how to be a Handmaid:

Moira stood up straight and looked firmly ahead. She drew her shoulders back, pulled up her spine, and compressed her lips. This was not our usual posture. Usually we walked with heads bent down, our eyes on our hands or the ground. Moira didn’t look much like Aunt Elizabeth, even with the brown wimple in place, but her stiff-backed posture was apparently enough to convince the Angels on guard, who never looked at any of us very closely, even and perhaps especially the Aunts; because Moira marched straight out the front door, with the bearing of a person who knew where she was going; was saluted, presented Aunt Elizabeth’s pass, which they didn’t bother to check, because who would affront an Aunt in that way? And disappeared. (Atwood 142)

The faces of women are not noticed by men, for they are not of importance to them and there is no contact allowed between them. What is noticed, is the role each category must fulfil in Gilead and how the men must respond to each of the categories. Through this instance, and the overall characteristic of Gilead’s social structure, Atwood once again focusses on the objectification and portrayal of women in the non-fictional world, by overdrawing how women are judged on their appearances, instead of their personalities and other qualities.

The further objectification of women happens through the laws of Gilead by denying them the right to literacy. The majority of women in Gilead are not even allowed to look at words, and only the Aunts are given permission to use a limited amount of texts in educating the Handmaids. Atwood, just like Piercy, stresses the importance of language in her novel. “Language in Gilead is recognized as a very powerful tool; its disruptive power is intuited, and hence only those in power are allowed to use it” (Loudermilk 130). Men are allowed to
practice literacy, but they too encounter rules when it comes to the texts they are free to read. In her article “Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias”, Ildney Cavalcanti argues that it is a characteristic of “[c]ontemporary feminist dystopias [to] overtly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as instrument of both (men’s) domination and (women’s) liberation” (152). This is also the case with Atwood’s narrative:

As she exposes the interweaving of linguistic manipulation and dominant patriarchal ideologies in the dystopic spaces, while at the same time giving [the text a feminist tone], as these elements can be interpreted as (sometimes crude and straightforward) metaphors for the historical silencing of women. (Cavalcanti 152)

Atwood points at the silencing of women through the ages by denying the female characters in her novels the right to write and read. However, she silences some of them even more literally, as Handmaids are not allowed to talk, unless when spoken to or in strictly formulated sentences. Offred discusses how the Handmaids have to listen to tapes of a man reading excerpt of the Bible: “Blessed are the silent. I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking” (Atwood 100). Women are made powerless by taking both literacy and speech from them, leaving no room for identity or rebellion to form, as all rituals and moments of speech are “both formalized and formularized” (Loudermilk 131). Atwood may be referring to the time when women were not allowed to vote or receive education here, as a means to point to the possibilities of a “cyclical process” (Ketterer 213) to emerge. In his article “Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale: A Contextual Dystopia”, David Ketterer argues that “[a] cyclical view of history may, of course, take the form of static repetition or of a progressive or regressive spiral” (214). While Atwood does not fully commit to the notion of a cyclical view of history, the silencing of women in her novel does seem to connect to the possibility of a historical events repeating themselves.

As the breeders of society, Handmaids are stripped of their names and denoted to the possession of the Commander who owns them, objectifying them even further as potential child-bearers instead of humans. The main character of the narrative, is given a new name in the beginning of the story, as she is assigned the Handmaid of the Commander Fred. Her name becomes ‘Offred’, therefore literally stating that she is ‘of’ the Commander Fred. Her own name is never clearly stated throughout the novel and only hinted at in the first chapter, when Offred enumerates the names of a few of the women in the training centre for the Handmaids: “we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June”
The only name that is not assigned to a character throughout the narrative is June, therefore suggesting that this is Offred’s real name. Offred describes that the removal of her name is a primary factor for the loosing of her identity. As a result of its interdiction, her name gets a new meaning:

My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden. I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This names has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that’s survived from an unimaginably distant past. (Atwood 94)

Her name becomes the essence of who she was and would be if Gilead had never happened, and thus she keeps it to herself in the hope that she will someday get her identity back. Atwood seems to want to demonstrate that, though oppressed, Offred is still trying to maintain an identity of her own by both the act of recording her story and keeping her own name a secret. Atwood’s aim with this could be to depict the hope and strength of women while being oppressed, referring to oppressed women throughout the history of the non-fictional world, who have preserved their identity through writing.

Of all the different categories imposed on women, the Handmaid is the most objectified in Gilead, as they become commodities through the organs most crucial in Gilead; their wombs. It seems that Atwood is using the Handmaids as a way to criticise the imposing of motherhood on women in the non-fictional world. The expectation on women to become a mother is depicted through the demeaning of Handmaids to being wombs only. Gilead creates the impression that women are free to choose to be a Handmaid. However, in describing the ritual where Commander Fred tries to impregnate her, Offred states: “[Rape does not cover it:] nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose” (Atwood 105). The women who gave birth in the past do seem to have an option, but, as Offred hints at here, it is either to become a Handmaid or to be banished to the Colonies, where an early death is certain. The women who are expected to become Handmaids thus have to endure being a “two-legged womb” in the hope of surviving the horror of Gilead. In doing so, the Wives of the households to which they are assigned gain full control over them. The Handmaids in Gilead become an extension of the Wives, in the sense that their wombs, and thus potential children grown from that womb, are the property of the Wives. Alongside that, Wives are given control over the Handmaids during what is known
as “the Ceremony”: when the men have to perform the strictly regulated ritual of impregnating the Handmaids. In her narration, Offred is highly clinical in the depiction of her position during the Ceremony:

Above me, toward the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge. (Atwood 104)

The ritual of the Ceremony, and the Wife’s ownership of the Handmaid’s womb, and entire body, are endorsed through the Biblical teachings of Gilead. The excerpt from the bible by which they validate the rituals in Gilead is stated as the epigraph of the novel:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go it unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (Atwood 9)

In alignment with the excerpt from the bible, the Handmaids are expected to bear children for the Wives and are then expelled from the household as soon as they have given birth. They are not seen as the mothers of the babies, only the surrogates that grow the baby, as the Wives are the accepted mothers, as the wives of the biological fathers. With contempt, Offred describes the end of the Birthing ritual between the Wife and the Handmaid, which again is strictly regulated:

The two Wives in blue help the third Wife, the Wife of the household, down from the Birthing Stool and over to the bed, where they lay her down and tuck her in. The baby, washed now and quiet, is placed ceremoniously in her arms. . . . The Commander’s Wife looks down at the baby as it it’s a bouquet of flowers: something she’s won, a tribute. . . . We stand between Janine and the bed, so she won’t have to see this. . . . she’s crying helplessly, burnt-out miserable tears. (Atwood 137)
During this scene becomes clear that motherhood in Gilead does not mean to nurture a child, born from love into a happy home, but a treasure that promises safety for the Wives who have received them, as they have now given their husband a child. The only positive outlook that is given for the Handmaid during this scene is that “she’ll never be sent to the Colonies, she’ll never be declared Unwomen. That is her reward.” (Atwood 137) However, she will be sent on to the next family, to play the role of womb again.

In conclusion, Margaret Atwood criticises the traditional role of women through the objectification of the women in her novel by limiting the roles they have to a few categories. Women are stripped of their identity, as a result of these categories, and by denying them the right of literacy and thus the ability to express themselves in writing or speech. The Handmaids especially become agents through which Atwood denotes her criticism, as their only worth in Gilead is their womb. She thus is critical of the way women are perceived because of their gender and ability to become a mother. All in all, Gilead seems to serve as Atwood’s warning to the reader to beware of sexism and the objectification of women in the non-fictional world.
Conclusion

This bachelor thesis examined the use of the dystopian and utopian genre in criticizing the traditional role of women in society by analysing Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Piercy’s world was accepted as a utopia for the analysis, while in contrast, Atwood’s world was analysed as a dystopia. The focal point of this thesis was on the portrayal of women, especially in regard to how motherhood is present in the worlds created. The aim of this thesis was to contribute to research on women’s science fiction novels within gender studies.

As described in the first chapter of this bachelor thesis, many feminist authors have used dystopias and utopias as ways to voice their opinions and ideas on the main debates surrounding multiple women’s movements. Marge Piercy’s and Margaret Atwood’s intention with their novels is very different when it comes to this notion, as both were instigated by different events in their environment to write their novel, as well as having written their novels in different decades. Marge Piercy seems to have been incited to write her novel by women such as Joanna Ross and Shulasmith Firestone. Especially when comparing her work to the aim of Firestone’s book – published five years before the publication of Piercy’s novel –, it seems that Piercy was directly encouraged by Firestone to create Mattapoisett. In the following quote, Merja Makinen’s words are used to shortly recapitulate the scope of Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex: the Case for Feminist Revolution*:

> [In her book she argued] for a re-evaluation of society and particularly marriage and child-rearing. Her denunciation of wives as slave-labour, and pregnancy as barbaric, argued for the re-thinking of technology. Technology could enhance personal freedom and destroy the nuclear family, through artificial reproduction. (136)

Mattapoisett seems to be created in answer to Firestone’s call. Exactly like Firestone instigated, Piercy explored potential technological developments in her novel that would allow for women to be free from the responsibility of pregnancy. Nuclear families have made way for families with three mothers that nurture a child until it turns twelve and marriage, and as a result wives, no longer exists and instead people are free to have intimate relationships with anyone. All in all, technology does really enhance personal freedom in Mattapoisett. In comparison, Atwood’s narrative can be seen as strengthening Firestone’s arguments, by amplifying the reasons why Firestone wants the non-fictional world to change in the first place. The novel can be interpreted as going in the opposite direction of what Firestone
suggests writers should explore, but the outcome might be very much with the same results. Women are not freed from, what Firestone calls, ‘the barbaric pregnancies’, rather, they are further ensnared by it. Marriage is the social ideal in Gilead, so that women become commodities for men who have gained a certain social status. Although it could be argued that the nuclear family is destroyed in Atwood’s republic, the result is very much the same; a strictly regulated form of families to which the people of Gilead have to comply. In short, while Piercy’s novel frees women from pregnancies by creating a machine, Atwood’s narrative can be interpreted as creating machines out of women.

While Piercy aims at moving away from the gender binary in Woman on the Edge of Time, Margaret Atwood uses it to increase the intention of her novel. As a result of her machine, ‘the brooder’, Piercy is able to create a world without the gender binary and where men and women are free from gendered expectations. Both can become mothers, or decide to never have children. She presents gender as a social construct and a product of society, by allowing masculine and feminine features to appear in her characters simultaneously, which is especially displayed through the character Luciente. As opposed to Piercy, Atwood amplifies the gender binaries in Gilead by creating a system of gendered categories to which everyone is assigned. In doing so, Atwood addresses the issues created by the gender binary, as the result in Gilead is complete restriction for everyone. She seems to reinstate the extremist traditional Christian ideals to demonstrate how the non-fictional world has all the elements to turn into a sexist dystopian society that further conforms to the gender binary.

Though Woman on the Edge of Time and The Handmaid’s Tale are almost each other’s opposites to the extreme, the themes they deal with are overarching. With both novels, the authors seem to aim at emphasizing the traditional role of the woman as a mother only. Each in different ways, the narratives underscore how the expectation on women is that they will bear children. In Atwood’s novel, this is achieved by creating a society where the most fertile women become “two-legged wombs”, and are objectified and treated as only that. The care they receive, both medical and at the home, is catered towards creating the most optimal environment to grow a child in. She thus emphasizes the expectations put on women to bear children in Gilead, in order to criticise how this is ingrained in the non-fictional world. Piercy’s narrative achieves the focus on the woman as a mother by creating a society where women are no longer expected to be mothers, only if they wish to become one. The same option is then also offered to all men, resulting in a world with equal opportunities. In doing
so, Piercy contrasts the non-fictional world and its expectations sharply with her utopia and its possibilities.

There are many options for further research on this topic, both within the scope of this bachelor thesis, as well as in the broader field of gender studies. A possibility for the expansion of this thesis would be to analyse multiple other novels, such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), which discusses androgyny and the implications this has for motherhood, or a more recent novel; *The Power* (2016) by Naomi Alderman, which experiments with a sudden change of power in society when women are given the paranormal skill of inflicting pain with the touch of their fingers. Both novels appear to offer new insights into the portrayal of women and motherhood within the genre, making them suitable for expansion of this thesis. This bachelor thesis also discussed the use and importance of language in both Marge Piercy’s and Margaret Atwood’s novels. However, it would be fruitful to expand on this in future research. An optional approach is to look at how the novels correlate with the theory of écriture féminine, since Piercy and Atwood are experimental with their narrative techniques, thus potentially creating a women’s language that could be more closely examined in further research.
Bibliography


