Escaping the Male Orbit

Female Agency in Dystopian Literature

15 June 2017

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BA Thesis English Literature

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ENGELSE TAAL EN CULTUUR

Teacher who will receive this document: Usha Wilbers

Title of document: "Escaping the Male Orbit: Female Agency in Dystopian Literature"

Name of course: BA Thesis English Literature

Date of submission: 15 June 2017

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Abstract

People can be defined by the non-limitative categories of age, race, class, and/or profession. These categories can be subdivided in male and female gender, a divide which is traditionally linked to the sex of its subject. However, feminist theory has established that gender is a cultural construction, and that the gender category is moderately fixed by social determinism. Dystopian worlds diverge from the familiar world; they depict radically altered worlds with alien cultures that construct categories in unfamiliar ways. Such unfamiliar, transformed categories can be established through the performance of their subject: the subject's agency. This thesis analyses female agency in dystopian novels which use the dystopian landscape as a literary societal experiment that forces fictional characters to operate outside conventional paradigms of (gender) behaviour. The female agency as depicted in the following dystopian novels is analysed; *High-Rise, The Children of Men,* and *Never Let Me Go*. The research will show that the radical society of dystopian fiction transforms female categories, as is established by the female characters' agency. Furthermore, it argues that through the introduction of unfamiliar female categories in discourse, dystopian fiction contributes to gender equality in present-day society.

Keywords: gender, female agency, transformation of category, critical dystopia, dystopian literature, *High-Rise, The Children of Men, Never Let Me Go*

Acknowledgements

The creative process of writing a thesis of literary research has been an absolute joy. Not only because of the positive and stimulating guidance of my supervisor Usha Wilbers, but also because the process employed all knowledge, skill and interest that I have accumulated in life. For this I thank all teachers of English Language and Culture of the Radboud University, who infused me with their knowledge of English language and literature, filling the gaps of my common knowledge. More importantly, their enthusiasm for all matters English spurred my not always steadfast discipline to greater heights than ever before. I am very grateful to have encountered so many young, intelligent peers during my study, who have accepted me and helped me to rise above my own expectations. Such synergy is a well-known concept of theory, but rarely occurs in real-life. Finally, I would like to thank my husband and children for enduring my frequent absences and constant preoccupation with my study in general, and with this thesis in particular. I suspect never to recover from my serious case of Anglophilia.

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Introduction

> Yet, because I am a woman, I would not lead my readers to suppose that I mean
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> violently to agitate the contested question regarding the equality or inferiority of the
>
> sex, but as the subject lies in my way, and I cannot pass it over without subjecting the
>
> main tendency of my reasoning to misconstruction, I shall stop a moment to deliver,
>
> in a few words, my opinion (Wollstonecraft 214).

This excerpt is part of Mary Wollstonecraft's introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which she wrote in 1792 as a contribution to the contemporary discussion about human rights (Greenblatt 209). In this one sentence, she acknowledges that she violates strict boundaries of expected female behaviour by giving her opinion on a non-domestic matter, yet feels compelled to do so anyway, since her argumentation calls for it. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Stephen Greenblatt explains that Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is considered to be a landmark document in feminist writing that advocates equivalent education for boys and girls (209). Her argumentation is based on an analysis of female agency of 18ᵗʰ century England, a world in which women "were legally nonpersons who lost their property to their husbands at marriage and were incapable of instituting an action in the courts of law" (209). Wollstonecraft's partaking in a literary debate was an abnormal display of female agency. Moreover, it was an apt illustration of her personal life which was lived largely outside the cultural boundaries of the female category of her time (210-11). Feminist theorists like Judith Butler and Judith Kegan Gardiner extensively analyse the female category, as it is represented in discourse. In *Gender Trouble,* Butler refers to the "masculine/feminine binary" (7), and explains that the female gender, as "the cultural interpretation of sex" is often described as "a set of relations" (11). Here, she refers to the biological dichotomy between male and female, which is translated by discourse to a culturally constructed dichotomy. In *Provoking Agents,* Gardiner explains that in post-war

academic theories, the premise "male is to female as active is to passive" is a pervasive concept (2). The male/female dichotomy can be extended to other familiar opposites: strong versus weak; aggressive versus complaisant; stable versus fickle; rational versus emotional. This cultural dichotomy of man and woman contravenes modern laws proclaiming equality of the sexes. At first glance, living in Western present-day society that has espoused human rights as fundamental to every man, woman and child, would be similar as to living in utopia in the eyes of Wollstonecraft. Alas, notwithstanding modern political law, modern female agency is still a limited one. Gardiner confirms this by saying that we live in "a dominant Western tradition that wants women to be passive and that suspects active women to be *agents provocateurs*, manipulators who incite others to harm" (1). She explains that agency is limited by social structure, because "agency is action that cannot arise from a single, individual source but is always mediated and preceded by other actions and must always take place within a field of power relations" (10). Here, she refers to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', 'field' and 'power relations'. Randal Johnson explains Bourdieu's concepts in his "*Editor's Introduction* Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature and Culture". Johnson states that a person's actions are subjective since they spring from a durable, unconscious system of dispositions imprinted by their 'habitus' (5). Bourdieu's unconscious system of dispositions reminds us of Louis Althusser's concept of 'interpellation', as is discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis. However, in contrast to Althusser, Bourdieu claims that a person's actions are not only regulated by the interpellation of their habitus, but also by objective forces of the 'field' in which they operate (6). A field can be defined as a "structured space with its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force" (6), and as such, it can be objectively defined. Bourdieu's concept of 'power relations' refers to the relations of force generated by important agents within that particular field (4). Combining the three concepts, it can be established that agency occupies the ever-changing space between habitus, field, and power relations. Moreover, despite the work of Wollstonecraft and those that followed her, female agency

operates within an even narrower social space, since women's actions are limited foremost by gender boundaries that are pervasive in all fields of modern society.

Judith Butler asks: "[i]f gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?" (11). In an attempt to answer this question, this thesis discusses how dystopian literature subverts social determinism by introducing alien social structures with unfamiliar power relations. As will be argued in chapter 1, such alien social structures can foreclose familiar categories, thereby necessitating transformation, both of category and agency, as a way of adapting to dystopian duress. In other words, contrary to social determinism which fixes categories, dystopian duress forces fixed categories to change, to transform, or to merge with other categories. However, a research in dystopian literature must address the fact that some academics consider dystopian literature to be a contradiction in terms. One of those academics is Arthur Krystal, who in his article in *Harper's Magazine,* "What is Literature?" answers his own question. He states that it is "a record of one human being's sojourn on earth, proffered in verse or prose that artfully weaves together knowledge of the past with a heightened awareness of the present in ever new verbal configurations" (5). This definition disqualifies all stories about non-humans, about alternative pasts, alternative presents, and about the future, as literature. Krystal labels them as genre fiction, in consonance with popular culture's embrace of dystopia. In young adult fiction and film, the dystopian genre is immensely popular. It often portrays strong female characters in lead roles, and due to this, people have become familiar with a wider range of female agency in the cinema than on the street. Whether labelled literature or fiction, the 21st century thus far has offered a rise in dystopian narratives of all categories, and despite dystopia's mass popularity, this research will show that Krystal's opinion is not shared by all academics. Therefore, it is legitimised to study female agency in dystopian novels which use the dystopian landscape as a literary societal experiment that forces fictional characters to operate outside conventional

paradigms of (gender) behaviour. For this research, three dystopian novels have been

selected: *High-Rise* by J.G. Ballard, *The Children of Men* by P.D. James, and *Never Let Me*

Go by Kazuo Ishiguro. The dystopian modifications in social and political structures

transform familiar categories and agency, which motivates the following research question:

> How does female agency, as established in the dystopian novels *High-Rise*,
>
> *The Children of Men*, and *Never Let Me Go,* illustrate the effect of dystopian duress
>
> on the transformation of familiar female gender categories?

As mentioned before, by changing familiar social paradigms, dystopia offers a wide range of

female agency. This phenomenon is foregrounded overtly in feminist critique, as is explained

by Alessa Johns in "Feminism and Utopianism". She states, that "the utopian imagination has

been crucial for feminists" (175), especially for feminist authors whose "collective effort can

generate the socio-political changes necessary to improve women's lives" (192). In *Beginning*

Theory, Peter Barry describes several forms of feminist critique, from the 1970s focus on

"attacking male versions of the world" (117), to works of later decades that were "exploring

the nature of the female world and outlook" (117). Such works often portray female

characters whose category and agency are heavily distorted, thus "exposing what might be

called the mechanisms of patriarchy" (117). Margaret Atwood's extensively studied novel

The Handmaid's Tale is an example of such a feminist dystopia, in which the traditional

female gender is limited to the reproductive female. However, this study aims to discover

transformed gender categories through performed agency in dystopian literature in general,

not particularly literature in which the feminist theme is its main message, and dystopia a

means to achieve this. Therefore, instead of the feminist theme, the selected novels each

explore a different dystopian theme: urbanism gone awry in *High-Rise*; male reproductive

failure in *The Children of Men*; and sub-categorisation of human clones in *Never Let Me Go*.

The research is expected to demonstrate that under dystopian duress, female agency can be

transformed to a more diverse agency, moulded into an amalgam of familiar forms, or fully

stripped of its 'female' marker. Such a result will indirectly answer Butler's aforementioned question, that yes: gender construction is the result of social structure, and yes: by changing that social structure into a speculative structure gender can be constructed differently.

The speculative quality of dystopian literature may hinder its acknowledgement by the academic field; however, it is this quality that makes the genre a fertile field of study of female agency. Chapter 1 of this thesis will analyse dystopia in general, and converge to the term 'critical dystopia', referring to novels that use speculative writing as an effective means of social critique, as a means of foregrounding patterns of social determinism amongst others. It proposes concepts of theory of Sigmund Freud, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault to help develop the literary analyses, in addition to the aforementioned concepts of Bourdieu's habitus and Butler's gender. With this theoretical framework set, the following three chapters discuss the agency of the main three female characters of the selected novels, in sequence of their date of publication. Chapter 2 discusses *High-Rise*, chapter 3 *The Children of Men*, and chapter 4 *Never Let Me Go*. Each chapter will analyse the category of the selected female characters in succession, by close-reading their agency. The concluding chapter will discuss the results of these analyses, illustrate how dystopian narratives play a significant role in introducing unfamiliar gender categories, and suggest aspects which may be of interest for further academic research. With it, this thesis hopes to deliver a contribution to the academic field of literary research, by its opinion that dystopian depiction of perverse agency is an important gauge of society's forbearance of extended female agency.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

Research on dystopia is hindered by a dearth of theoretical examination on the one hand, and a profusion of opinion on the other. The term 'dystopia' evokes controversy: is it fiction or literature, escapism or social criticism, black utopia or an autonomous genre? Its definition is inherent to how the term is used, and its use is inherent to how it is defined. Academics who define dystopia as escapist fiction will not consider it a serious field of research, which may explain the scarcity of academic sources on the subject. Another explanation may be the fact that dystopia is a relatively new genre that came into existence in the early 20th century as a response to the horrors of the First World War, as Gregory Claeys explains in his article "The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell" (107). Regardless the cause, within this small number of sources a multitude of definitions can be found, as is described in the following paragraph. This thesis studies female agency in dystopian novels which use the dystopian landscape as a literary societal experiment that forces fictional characters to operate outside conventional paradigms of (gender) behaviour. Therefore, before the agency of the main female characters can be extricated from the selected narratives, an exploration of the theoretical labyrinth that connects dystopia, feminism, and agency, is in order.

First, the tangle of terms and definitions of dystopia must be unravelled. Claeys sees dystopia as a modern form of utopia, sometimes used as anti-utopia, or negative utopia, "to describe a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand" (107). Peter Fitting however, does not agree that utopia, dystopia and anti-utopia are interchangeable terms, and makes a clear distinction between the terms in his article "Utopia, dystopia and science fiction" (135). He states that anti-utopia describes a utopian society that should be feared, and is therefore "explicitly or implicitly a defence of the status quo", while dystopia criticises contemporary society, which suggests a call for change (140-1). In *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide,* Keith Booker agrees with Fitting that dystopia "constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or

political systems", but he disagrees with Fitting's view of anti-utopia when he states that dystopia is a "warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism" (3). Alessa Johns discusses dystopian novels by female authors under the heading of utopia in her article "Feminism and utopianism", and she agrees with Booker that dystopia is merely a negative manifestation of utopia (174-5). Most theorists consider dystopia as an offshoot of utopia, but some categorise it as an autonomous genre. In *Women's Utopian and Dystopian Fiction,* Sharon Wilson acknowledges that "little agreement exists about distinctions among science fiction, fantasy, speculative fiction, utopia, and dystopia" (1). She groups both utopia and dystopia as part of the larger genre: science fiction. In turn, science fiction is placed as part of the even larger genre 'the fantastic' by Lauren Lacey in *The Past That Might Have Been, the Future That May Come.* An important characteristic of the 'fantastic' genre is that it creates "moment[s] of uncertainty" (qtd. in Lacey 7), and these "fantastic moments enable the writer to unsettle assumptions about the narrative and about the world" (7,8). Fitting explains how the author's focus decides whether the narrative is utopia or science fiction. He states that utopia becomes science fiction when mixed with technology "as a tool for social transformation" (139). He continues that "most utopias before the nineteenth century were set *elsewhere* – on some imaginary island or unexplored region of earth". This 'elsewhere' could be reached through space by a sailing ship, or through time by falling asleep. Substituting a sailing ship for a spaceship and a dream for time travel changes utopia, or dystopia, to science fiction (138-9). Moreover, when technology is not the focus of the narrative, "science fiction's specific ability is not so much to predict the future, … but to show our own present through a particularly effective distorting lens" (144). Whether utopian or dystopian, "science fiction is a neutral form, able to express positions in opposition to or in defence of the status quo" (150). In summary, the pivot on which all these converging and diverging definitions revolve is dystopia's critical core. We recognise this in Lacey's discussion of "critical dystopias that trace how power dissolves and reforms" (106). It is mentioned by Claeys that

dystopias "may in fact be sharply critical of the societies they reflect" (107). Wilson explains "how utopia and dystopia create new worlds, establish genre, and critique gender roles, traditions and values" (2), and Johns states that utopia is "a force for transforming discontent into critique and desire into practical political action" (194). To conclude with Booker, he sees dystopia as "the epitome of literature in its role as social criticism", because:

> [d]ystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions (3).

In summary, this research of the theoretical labyrinth converges to the term 'critical dystopia' as a form of social criticism illustrated through the creation of alternative worlds.

After establishing dystopia's definition, the second part of this theoretical exploration focuses on the use of critical dystopia both as a subject for feminist literary criticism, and as a form of feminist literary expression. Fitting mentions that utopian writing in the 1970s was strongly influenced by feminism and the feminist slogan "the personal is political" (148). He continues to explain that by making 'the personal' central to the narrative, "all forms of human behaviour are valorized" (148), because the reader is aware of the emotions that motivate a character's response to a dystopian environment. Feminist critique on utopian discourse is a long tradition, as is explained by Johns. Early feminists as Wollstonecraft responded to the prejudices of traditional utopias, also "'blueprint', or 'end-state' utopias", in which the patriarchal structures were rigid and static, with far-reaching negative effects on the lives of women (174). Feminist utopian writers favour 'process-oriented' utopianism, which focus on inhabitants of society rather than society itself (174-82). In other words, they focus on people, and how politics affects them. She further states that utopian writing has always been the preferred vehicle for feminists to express social critique, because "gender equality

has never fully existed, so it must be imagined if it is to become a subject of conscious thought and discussion" (175). Fitting's and John's claim that dystopian narratives are particularly suited to address patriarchal structures is extensively discussed by Lacey. She states that the fantastic genre itself is a "narrative performance of disruption", and that writers, simply by using the fantastic, oppose patriarchal hegemony. The fantastic can be used as "a mode of interrupting and revising expectations tied to damaging and normalizing power" (6,7). In other words, a 'fantastic' narrative defamiliarizes social structure, and thereby weakens a reader's internalised resistance to any changes in that social structure. Furthermore, "[f]antastic fiction … offer[s] an ethics that embraces indeterminacy and possibility" (3), which Lacey coins "the ethics of becoming", "a way of interrupting, revising and remaking categories like class, gender, and race" (1). In contrast to a subject 'being' a certain category, the subject in the process of 'becoming', therefore cannot be categorised (15). When a subject adopts agency stemming from different categories, or attains a liminal position between categories, the subject becomes hybrid. Hybrid subjects "are slippery and difficult to control because they do not adhere to closed categories or to the binary logic that underlies moralizing discourses" (16-7); the aforementioned male/female dichotomy. The concept of 'becoming' is "a way to destabilize subjectivity", which allows for "reconfigurations of all the categories upon which subjectivity is built: gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and even species" (qtd. in Lacey 16). As mentioned in the previous chapter, category as part of identity is extensively discussed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, her founding text of post-feminist theory. Identity categories which "produce culturally intelligible "sex" ought to be understood as generative political structures" (187). In other words, Butler stresses that the use of familiar categories confirms existing political structures, since they are part of, and enforce the 'discursive', as is explained in the following paragraph. Conversely, "the reconceptualization of identity as *effect,* that is, as *produced or generated,* opens up possibilities of "agency" that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take

identity categories as foundational and fixed" (187). By this Butler refers to the possibility of transformation of category, of removing the mark from the female gender, a similar process to Lacey's 'ethics of becoming'. Dystopia can be used to interrupt familiar social structures, and overcome a reader's internalised adherence to these structures. It can then be used as the genesis of reconceptualised identities, representing these revised identities as a natural consequence of that dystopia, and thus propose radical forms of agency which are subversive to existing political structures. By appropriating politically foreclosed forms of agency to women, dystopia forefronts inequality of the sexes within existing social structures, which makes the genre a productive locus of today's feminist criticism.

In *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry states that today's feminist literary criticism is a product of the women's movement of the 1960s, of which Wollstonecraft's aforementioned *Vindication* is one of the founding texts (116). The 1960s movement was "literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence" (116). Per Barry, literature "provide[s] the role models which indicate[s] to women, and men, what constitute[s] acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations" (117). As demonstrated in previous paragraphs, in contrast to general literature, dystopian literature can provide radical female models, which can result in radical female agency. It is this aspect of critical dystopia that makes the genre an interesting field for research in female agency, and the third and last premise of this theoretical framework. Butler explains that agency itself depicts the agent, since "the "doer" is variably constructed in and through the deed" (181). In other words, by analysing the agency of a character, power relations become apparent that are part of the narrative's political structure. However, when Butler's transformation of category admits unfamiliar forms of agency, and when 'becoming' is set in a dystopian world, "we enter a world of radical uncertainty, since we can have no access to any fixed landmark which is beyond linguistic processing, and hence we have no

certain standard by which to measure anything" (Barry 59). Barry refers to the post-structuralist 'decentred universe' in which linguistic processing itself is under close scrutiny, because language is subjective, therefore, meanings are fluid. Under such circumstances, what methods should be used to establish female agency in the selected novels? In *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide,* Booker discusses several cultural theorists and critics. With respect to this study in female agency, only those concepts are mentioned that are productive in understanding the agency of Lacey's 'becoming' subject. The first is Sigmund Freud's 'pleasure principle', which Booker explains as the "strategies through which individuals seek happiness in the modern world" (29). However, three determining factors frustrate this search of pleasure: "the superior power of nature", "the feebleness of our own bodies", and "the inadequacy of the regulations … in the family, the state, and society", of which religion is also part (28-31). Freud sees "sexuality as the central locus of social oppression" (31). In other words, the extent of sexual repression is a true indicator of social oppression that limits a character's agency. Louis Althusser's concept of 'interpellation' is the second concept that is an important tool in dystopian narratives. In *Beginning Theory*, Barry defines interpellation as "the way the individual is encouraged to see herself of himself as an entity free and independent of social forces" (158). However, social forces are an integrated part of hegemony, the "internalised form of social control which makes certain views seem 'natural' or invisible so that they hardly seem like views at all, just 'the way things are'" (158). One cannot be free from social forces because they are partly internalised, and therefore influence our actions unconsciously. The third and last concept is from post-structuralist Michel Foucault. Foucault builds upon the former theories with the notion of the 'discursive', as the 'mental set' and ideology which encloses the thinking of all members of a given society (Barry 170). Subjects are "in the grip of large, invisible structures of official power", resulting in "ubiquity of power" (Booker 26). Therefore, the discursive is more than the sum of discourse, it encompasses all social and political power to which individuals are

subject. These three concepts reverberate in Lacey's 'ethics of becoming', and she explains this by Rosi Braidotti's definition: "Ethics is … a discourse about forces, desires and values that act as empowering modes of being" (qtd. in Lacey 15). The 'forces' may refer to the concept of 'discursive', the 'desires' to the 'pleasure principle', and the 'values' to the concept of 'interpellation'. Furthermore, Lacey stresses that "maintaining a conscious relationship to and with power … requires both critical awareness and diligence" (12-3). This awareness can be assisted by Bourdieu's concept of habitus and field to distinguish between the subjective interpellation of habitus and the objective interpellation of field. This thesis will strive to analyse female agency in the selected dystopian narratives in the footsteps of Butler's 'transformation' and Lacey's 'ethics of becoming'. Through the agency of the female characters, the acting female models may be established.

By close-reading the agency of the main female characters in the selected novels, transformed categories may be recognised. This theoretical exploration indicates that critical dystopias are like a house of cards, in which unfamiliar categories are stacked upon unfamiliar political structures, described by discursive language. Within this radical environment unknown forces of interpellation are at work, which makes the subject's agency the most tangible lead in deconstructing a female role. The following chapters will identify whether the female fictional characters operate outside conventional paradigms of (gender) behaviour through the analysis of their performed agency. This agency will be described per character, and form the basis of the analysis of their (transformed) category.

Chapter 2: *High-Rise*

J.G. Ballard wrote *High-Rise* in 1975, a period in which "post-war rebuilding and tackling of severe housing shortages" called for drastic measures in urban development, as Jonathan Davies explains in his article "Transition, Abstraction and Perverse Concreteness in J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise*" (3). "The development of prefabricated building components" … led to the wide-scale building of concrete high-rise estates" (3), and it is this development that is the central theme of this dystopian novel. It is set in a high-rise in the Brutalist architectural style of exposed concrete structures, and strict geometrical lines. The Brutalist style was used by "a disparate group of architects united by … a shared disenchantment with the timidity and parochialism of prominent post-war styles", Davies explains (3). The awareness achieved by the research described in the previous chapter prompts attention to the expressed dichotomy of brutalist versus timidity and parochialism, signalling that this high-rise is an urban, masculine environment. This masculinity is further promoted by the three male narrators of *High-Rise*: Richard Wilder, Dr Robert Laing and Anthony Royal. The novel describes a downward spiral of social degeneration, driven and illustrated by the gradual disintegration of the high-rise. The three male characters fight each other for survival and dominancy, but, it is a group of women who re-establish a new order within the high-rise, nourished – in the literal sense – by the remaining men: an order of feminine brutalism.

Dystopia's performance of disruption is illustrated by the opening line of *High-Rise*: "Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months" (1). Had Dr Robert Laing been walking the dog, instead of eating it, this sentence would express a normality recognisable to most Western readers. With this sentence, the author initiates an immediate process of de-familiarization, preparing the reader for what is to come. Ballard founds his incredulously undisturbed process of decline on a careful description of the high-rise and its inhabitants. The building is not part of a housing project

for the poor, but "[i]n effect, the apartment block [is] a small vertical city, its two thousand inhabitants boxed up in the sky", who form "a virtually homogeneous collection of well-to-do professional people" (4, 6). Of the forty floors, two floors are dedicated to amenities. The 10th floor has "a supermarket, bank and hairdressing salon, a swimming-pool and gymnasium, a well-stocked liquor store and a junior school for the few young children on the block", and the 35th floor contains "a second, smaller swimming-pool, a sauna and a restaurant" (4). The description of these luxurious surroundings is needed to support the severance of the high-rise's inhabitants with the world outside, a world seen through windows and from balconies, as a "landscape of an abandoned planet receding slowly from … mind (5). In short, the constructed environment of the high-rise is preferred to reality, because "[b]y its very efficiency, the high-rise took over the task of maintaining the social structure that supported them all … [,] it removed the need to repress every kind of anti-social behaviour, and left them free to explore any deviant or wayward impulses" (44). This freedom quickly results in a class struggle which divides the "collection of high-income professional people … into three distinct and hostile camps" (69). These three camps are geographically separated by the service floors: the lower nine floors house lower-class professionals and families with children, middle-class professionals are housed between the 10th and 35th floor, and on the top five floors, "with their high-speed elevators and superior services, their carpeted staircases", the upper-class resides (70). The three male protagonists each represent a class derived by the floor of their housing. Richard Wilder, a television producer and former rugby player, lives with his wife and two sons on the 2nd floor, Dr Robert Laing, a physician who prefers the lecture room to a private practice, lives on the 25th floor, and Anthony Royal, architect of the high-rise, and first person to move in, lives on the top floor. The three female characters whose agency is analysed for this thesis, occupy parallel spaces in the high-rise, both physically and socially. The first is Wilder's wife Helen, the second Laing's neighbour Charlotte Melville, and the third is Anna Royal, the architect's wife. All women are described

through the eyes of the male protagonists, when their paths cross, or when their presence satisfies their needs. However, against the background of brutal battle, the women wrest power from the men by joining forces, thereby reinstating and augmenting their former agency.

Helen Wilder is introduced by Laing as "a pale young woman with a postgraduate degree who reviewed children's books for the literary weeklies, [who] seemed permanently exhausted" (12). Wilder, her husband, acknowledges the toll of motherhood, when he remembers that when he first met Helen, "she had been a bright and self-confident producer's assistant, more than a match for Wilder with her quick tongue" (58). In contrast to her former self, "[n]ow, after the combination of the two boys and a year in the high-rise, she was withdrawing into herself, obsessively wrapped up with the children's most elementary activities. Even her reviewing of children's books was part of the same retreat" (58). Wilder takes active part in the accelerating nightly bursts of violence in the high-rise, revelling in his strong physique. As a mother, Helen is immediately affected when, as a result of the violence, facilities and functions gradually breakdown. The junior school closes, the supermarket fails to restock, the air-conditioning produces dust, the swimming-pools become polluted and the roof garden is barred. Sleepless nights deepen her exhaustion to a trance-like state (54-83). She passively endures her changed circumstances, but at one time implores Wilder to leave the high-rise. However, to him "[t]hat's equivalent to being driven out" (60). He decides to leave her, and starts a quest to the 40th floor to confront Royal. When he returns after a failed first attempt, he finds Helen, together with other mothers and children, celebrating the establishment of a makeshift school in his own living room (165). He notices, without realising its significance, that Helen is assisted by women of higher floors, a group "offering help to abandoned or isolated wives, sisters of sinister charity" (167). In a rare bout of paternity, he leaves to search for food, but never returns. Weeks later, Helen and her sons are found on the 19th floor by a raiding party of the upper levels, which are led by Royal. He

remarks "how easily this intelligent woman had fitted into the upper levels of the high-rise"

(189). Helen has become part of a group of outcast mothers, and earns her keep as a house

servant. When Royal gropes her during a meal, she stands "passively with her tray, unaware

of Royal fondling her, partly because she had been molested by so many men during the past

months, but also because the sexual assault itself had ceased to have any meaning" (192).

Royal is displeased with Helen, because she had washed bloodstains from his white jacket,

stains that symbolise his authority. He wonders: "Had she done this deliberately, knowing that

it would emasculate him?" (193). His fears are confirmed when the women abandon him,

reducing him to a leader without subjects. Helen meets her husband a final time, when he has

reached the roof-garden. Wilder recognises her, but is thrown by "her matter-of-fact gaze"

(239) just before the whole group of women attack him. The last time when Helen is

mentioned, she is seen by Laing, leading "a marauding band of women" (246). The

abovementioned description initially portrays Helen as an extension of her husband. His

aggressive masculinity is contrasted to her passive nurturing femininity, the traditional mother

category. As such, she is ignored by Laing, abandoned by Wilder and used by Royal. The care

for her children limits her agency, but fuels her determination to overcome the complete

disruption of her environment. While the men battle for dominance, she rises from the 2nd

floor to the top, both physically and socially, surpasses her former agency of professional

worker and mother, and achieves the agency of a leader. Ironically, this remarkable journey

plays in the background of the narrative, unnoticed and ignored by the men, until they

succumb.

The second character who is researched is Charlotte Melville. Similar to Helen,

Charlotte is a mother, but, in contrast to Helen, she is portrayed as an active, seductive

woman. Charlotte is "a copywriter with a small but lively advertising agency", who lives in

the middle section of the high-rise. She is described as a self-confident, good-looking widow

of thirty-five, with an "easy style" (10), to whom Laing is attracted. He likes it when she starts

their dinner date with saying "[l]ook, I only want to talk about myself" (11), and he has thought about "a possible course of an affair with her" (15). She is aware of the rising tension in the high-rise, and keeps her son from going to school on the 10th floor. When Laing tries to trivialise the tensions, she warns him "Robert! You ought to take all this seriously!" (47), but he feels that she, despite being an "intelligent and likeable woman [is] failing to get the point" (47). They have sex once, and for Laing, their relationship has run its course. At their next meeting, she has moved in with another man after her own apartment is ransacked. Laing feels no resentment, because "Charlotte needed someone who would bring out her forcefulness and grit" (137). Days later, when she returns to retrieve food from her apartment, she stumbles over Wilder, who has vandalised her apartment, and plundered her hidden stack of food and wine. He strikes her, terrorises her, and rapes her. Afterwards, they have breakfast on the balcony from the leftovers, and "[a]lthough her mouth and throat were bruised, she seemed unconcerned, watching Wilder with a passive expression" (184). The last time she is mentioned, she has become a member of the band of women. Charlotte's described agency initially portrays her as a professional, intelligent woman, and a responsible parent to her son. Her easy attachment to male sponsors suggests that she is calculating and opportunistic, a character trait respected by Laing. Despite Laing's respect, discursive powers categorise her as 'the seductress'. Her stoic behaviour towards Wilder after the rape and during the final attack gives the impression that she is not a victim of rape, but has encouraged the act. That behaviour contrasts with her show of motherly concern for her son and Laing when the violence first starts. How she manages come in touch with the group of women is not described, which deprives the reader of developing an emotional attachment to her character. By joining the group of women, she recaptures her independence from men, and provides for her son, achieving parental agency. However, she still seems emotionally detached. Where Helen's detachment is presented as self-protective numbness, Charlotte's detachment suggests a character flaw that has been brought to the surface by the cycle of violence.

The third female character who is analysed for this thesis is Anne Royal. Anne is portrayed as the ornamental wife of Anthony Royal, who lives on the top floor. Before the violence started, Anne was a reluctant inhabitant. Now that venturing below the top floor has become perilous, "she told Royal that they were leaving" (97). She is packing, helped by her female friend Jane Sheridan, inhabitant of middle levels of the high-rise. Jane remarks: "You won't get out now even if you want to", because all elevators are deliberately held on lower floors (107). Anne's discontentment with her living circumstances are explained by her husband:

> As Royal knew now, his young wife would never be happy in the special atmosphere
>
> of the high-rise. The only daughter of a provincial industrialist, she had been brought
>
> up in the insulated world of a large country house, … maintained by a staff of servants
>
> in the full-blown nineteenth-century manner (98-9).

This excerpt illustrates the earlier discussed architectural dichotomy extended to feminine versus masculine; the parochial Anne living in Royal's Brutalist high-rise. He states that the rising hostilities lay bare "all her long-ingrained upper-class uncertainties about maintaining her superior place in the world" (99). Royal had tried to placate Anne with elaborate black-tie parties. He likes to display his young wife, "whom he was happy to see taken out by other men" (101). Despite the danger, he encourages Anne and Jane to go to the 10th floor, where they need to hide for fighting residents from lower floors, and are rescued by Royal eventually. This ordeal is presented as a turnabout in Anne's character, because, "[n]ow that she had accepted it, the threat of violence in the air had matured Anne" (129). Royal observes that she listens intently to his second-in-command, Pangbourne "as if aware that the gynaecologist might be useful to her in more ways than the purely professional" (129). After the party, Royal deliberately starts to fondle Jane, while Anne "watched them without speaking, as if she approved, not from any fashionable response to marital infidelity, but from what Royal realized was a sense of tribal solidarity, a complete deference to the clan leader"

(130). However, this deference is short-lived, because a few days later "Anne had withdrawn from him, partly out of fear for Royal, but also because she realized that he no longer needed her. At last, ... Anne had decided to join her fellow residents" (192). Within the group of women, she becomes a governess to the youngest children. In a sense, Anne's narrative reads as a coming-of-age story, a privileged innocent who is put to the test, to reappear as a mature realist. Her trajectory is well-known in discourse as the romantic heroin, abandoned by supporting males, who is forced to work as a governess. Unfortunately, her lack of education has only qualified her to tend to the youngest children. Maturing has changed her category from the child wife to caretaker of children, but crucially, her agency is not much improved.

The high-rise is the epitome of modern urban living, where every man's need is catered for by automated processes of technology. Due to failing technology, utopia turns dystopia, and the real needs of man surface. Ballard uses this urban dystopia to draw attention to the negative aspects of urbanisation. His opinion may be understood in Anne's words when she says to Royal: "I hate to say it, but this place hasn't worked" (102). However, her words represent the female perspective only. When the spiral of violence starts, Helen, Charlotte, and Anne want to leave the high-rise, and return to the world outside. However, the women do not display sufficient social independence to act upon their wish to leave, and their initial indecisiveness draws them into the maelstrom of events. The male characters' response is the opposite to the female's. The men welcome the violence, vandalise the building's nurturing facilities, and jealously guard their dystopian high-rise shell from outer world's knowledge. Per Jonathan Davies, "[f]or them, only by tearing away the 'fake' façade of cultivated behaviour can they arrive at an honest state of being; only their primal or perverse desiring selves … have any palpable reality" (9). Apparently, civilisation has hampered their true Freudian search for pleasure, limiting their male agency. The women and children are caught up in the violence, reduced to pawns in the battle strategy, condoning theft, assault, and rape. This dichotomy in behaviour typifies Judith Gardiner's "male is to female as active is to

passive" (2). The focus on the male strife reduces the female struggle to the shadows. However, the dystopian setting encourages the women to emulate the men's response. It liberates them from their socially imprinted passiveness, and when they emerge, they are portrayed as "sisters of sinister charity" (Ballard 167). They encircle men, "[i]n their bloodied hands, they carr[y] knives with narrow blades" (Ballard 240), and they cook the men's flesh to feed their children. Familiar female categories such as mother and teacher are combined with primal categories such as hunter and killer. These transformed categories are the result of dystopian duress. It is clear, that Brutalism is contagious to both men and women.

Chapter 3: *The Children of Men*

The Children of Men by P.D. James was published in 1992. The novel speculates that three years later, in the year Omega, all men mysteriously become sterile and the human race faces extinction. Also in 1992, a study was published in the *British Medical Journal*, which "systematically reviewed the statistics on semen quality for the past half-century and concluded that a significant decrease was occurring in male fertility", as is remarked by Susan Squier in "From Omega to Mr. Adam: The Importance of Literature for Feminist Science Studies" (133). The fact that these two texts were published simultaneously in two separate strands of discourse is not coincidental, according to Squier. She claims that literature and science are "an ensemble of social relations", which are "all concerned in their different ways with the possibility of a global sperm crash" (153). If Squier's suggestion holds, then these discursive global concerns are translated by *The Children of Men* to the year of 2021, to a future but still familiar English setting. In James's dystopian world, scientific research on infertility has remained fruitless, and the people are resigned to their fate. In this world, all lives are defined by the absence of children. A sedate society is left, stripped of its vitality, as is emphasised by the white, middle-class setting of the novel. Its narrator and male protagonist is Theodore Faron, a fifty-year-old Oxford professor, specialised in 19th century English history. The three female characters in the novel, Helena, Julian, and Miriam are portrayed through the eyes of Theo. In 2021, England is in effect a dictatorship ruled by Theo's cousin Xan Lippiatt, the Warden of England. For a period, Theo was observer-advisor to the Warden. However, because his status was derived solely from his relation to Xan and too symbolic to generate any real influence, he resigned his seat. Xan's regime has taken measures to counter nationwide ennui by creating free adult education, inviting selected foreign people to maintain public services, banishing criminals of all calibre to the Isle of Man, and instituting national porn shops "to stimulate our flagging appetites" (9). In this dystopian setting, sexuality is not Freud's locus of oppression, however, to monitor people's

fertility, men and women are called in for examination regularly. These medical examinations are a demeaning form of state surveillance, for which reason people deflect from them increasingly. Members of the youngest generation are called 'Omegas'. Indulged from birth, these twenty-five-year-old adults behave like adolescents, terrorising the older generations. Huddling in their homes, the elder watch endless episodes of soap operas like *Neighbours,* as images of the utopian past (283). As "one small additional defence against personal accidie", Theo has decided to write a journal (4). He writes about the summer holidays spent with Xan, about his ex-wife Helena, and the tragic accident that killed their daughter Natalie. Via the female student Julian, who attended his class 'Victorian Life and Times' (51), Theo meets the rebel group 'Five Fishes', and gets embroiled in their cause. The group consists of five members: Theo's former student Julian, her husband Rolf who is leader of the group, Luke, Gascoigne, and Miriam (73-98). When Julian becomes pregnant, she is determined to stay out of reach of The Warden, and the group turns to Theo for help (208). While Julian and Miriam are focussed on the pregnancy and subsequent childbirth, the male characters surrounding Julian battle for the symbolic power that the new-born child may generate for them. This battle illustrates that the absence of children has disrupted England's social structure, and has distorted familiar power relations. Notwithstanding the ubiquitous infertility, all three female characters which are studied in this novel have experience with the female reproductive body. Helena tragically lost her daughter of fifteen months; Miriam, as a midwife, delivered two-hundred-and-eighty babies; and Julian is pregnant and eventually gives birth to a healthy son. Thus, each woman is not only defined by the female body and ensuing agency of the sex; she also shows a different agency of female gender, as we will see in the next paragraphs.

Helena is Theo's ex-wife, a woman who finds happiness in the domestic realm. Their marriage had been more practical than romantic, Theo admits. As the Master's daughter, Helena came with a social status which he desired for himself. Because she had a degree in history, Theo expected her to share his intellectual interests. However, it transpired that she

married him to escape the parental house, because she "couldn't wait to get away" (163).

Moreover, her degree turned out to be the result of hard work and connections, not of

intelligence. Initially, there was sexual attraction between the two, but later in the marriage,

sex was more perfunctory than passionate. When their daughter Natalie was born, "Helena

became obsessed by her, totally enchanted, enslaved" (42). Theo recounts that she firmly

asserted the mother role, since "the child was her responsibility, she made it plain enough it

wasn't mine" (42). In an unfortunate concurrence of events, Theo accidently kills their

daughter. Since this tragic event took place in October 1994, when infertility was omnipresent

already, there was no hope for a second child. Theo observes bitterly that "[t]here is nothing

more effective than the death of a child for exposing, without any possibility of self-deceit,

the emptiness of a failing marriage" (163). Helena remarries a younger man, Rupert, and "had

taken pleasure in making a home for him … and he basked in the result like a child with a

new nursery" (165). This home is characterised sarcastically by Theo as "a commonplace

edifice in north Oxford with the sacramental importance of shared love and shared washing-

up, commitment to total honesty and to a well-balanced diet, a new hygienic kitchen and

hygienic sex twice a week" (162). His derisive tone reveals that he considers his scholarly

Georgian townhouse to be superior to his ex-wife's suburban domesticity. He speculates

about her sex-life with Rupert, because "[s]ex totally divorced from procreation has become

almost meaninglessly acrobatic" (164). When he is invited to a belated birthing party,

celebrating their cat Mathilda's litter, the company drinks tea in the conservatory, with "pâté

sandwiches, home-made scones and fruit-cake brought in on a tray with a newly starched

linen tray cloth and small matching napkins" (166). Theo then wonders whether Helena wants

"to show how good a wife she could be to a man prepared to appreciate her talents" (166).

Theo, Helena, and Rupert discuss a protest pamphlet distributed by the Five Fishes, and

Helena vehemently denounces their objectives, finally saying to Rupert "[d]arling, I think we

ought to tear it up", which he does immediately (169). Theo observes that Helena's present

life becomes her, it makes her happy, and he recognises that he could never have given her such happiness (170). Helena's portrayal reminds us of the virtuous Victorian 'angel of the house', but, although Theo is a scholar of Victorian history, his assessment of her is not a positive one. The social background of Helena's youth, and the intellectual environment of her adult life, have given her ample opportunity to venture outside traditional gender boundaries. However, her agency is firmly located within the domestic field, to being a wife, and a mother. When the latter role is denied to her, she compensates by mothering her husband and her cat, and by creating her ideal home. When the political pamphlet of the Five Fishes invades this home, she defends her territory, ordering her husband to assist her. Only within the domestic realm she exerts her authority, and with it she assumes the traditional agency of the female gender. However, even before Omega, such agency was defined as old-fashioned, a thing of the past. Helena's agency upholds traditions that reminds us of the pastoral England, in which nature nurtured man, instead of betraying him with infertility. Moreover, this infertility subverts her gendered agency to an even more limited, purely domestic category. By focusing on domestic life, she denies the social breakdown caused by Omega. Ultimately, Helena's agency recreates a pre-dystopian past much preferred to her dystopian present.

Miriam is a member of the Five Fishes group, a former midwife of Jamaican descent, and some years older than Theo. Throughout the narrative, she is portrayed as a balanced, professional woman, content to assist any leader, but stepping in when deemed necessary. In his journal, Theo gives his first impression of her:

> She was tall and gracefully built with a long, fine-featured face, the coffee-coloured skin hardly lined, denying the whiteness of the hair. She was wearing slim black trousers tucked into boots, a high-necked brown jersey and sheepskin jerkin, an elegant, almost exotic contrast to the rough serviceable country clothes of the three men (79).

In contrast to the men in her group, Miriam takes initiative when she meets Theo for the first time, giving him "a firm handshake and a speculative, half-humorous colluding glance, as if they were already conspirators" (79). This interaction shows that she approaches Theo as an equal, in a sympathetic, non-competitive way. During his introduction to the group, she speaks on behalf of them, sometimes adding to the words of Rolf, the leader, and sometimes ignoring his interjections. Her stake in the Five Fishes is a personal one. Her younger brother knocked-over a female Omega and was subsequently sentenced to the Penal Colony on the Isle of Man. The gruesome and inhumane conditions of the Man Penal Colony show striking similarities with the early years of the Australian Penal Colonies, but with one important difference: prisoners are simply dumped on the Isle of Man, and left without any supervision, ensuring that only the most ruthless convicts survive. Miriam's brother managed to escape, but was eventually arrested and executed. She wants justice, and has joined the Five Fishes for emotional reasons. When the group needs Theo to aid their flight, she rationalises her decision to join, telling him that "[n]othing we've done has been sensible, only necessary" (204). However, Miriam is the sensible one within the group, she mitigates the competitive confrontations between Rolf and Theo, supports Julian when needed, and remains practical when others are emotional. She shows remarkable insight in other people's psychology and motives, as is revealed during a rare emotional outburst, when she says to Theo: "We know you're clever and sarcasm is your way of showing us just how clever, but I can't cope with it for the moment. And don't antagonize Rolf. If you care at all about Julian, calm it, OK?" (207). During their flight, Theo chooses Miriam to accompany him in dangerous situations, and listens to her advice, especially regarding Julian's pregnancy. This pregnancy is the main reason for their flight, because Julian is adamant in her wish to have the baby by herself, with the aid of Miriam. Miriam's authority as a midwife is challenged only once by Theo, when he implores her to convince Julian to have the baby in the hospital, to make use of the Warden's protection and medical care. Theo doubts her motives then, accusing her, that "[i]t would be

quite a thing, wouldn't it? Midwife to the first of a new race, if that is what this child is destined to be. You don't want to share the glory; you're afraid you might not be allowed even a share" (219). According to Soo Darcy, Theo's estimation of a midwife's position in the medical field is a valid one. In her article "Power, Surveillance and Reproductive Technology in P.D. James' *The Children of Men*", she discusses the "hierarchy of power and a privileging of obstetric knowledge over the practice of midwifery" (96). Theo pictures Julian giving birth surrounded by "distinguished obstetricians, summoned from retirement" and their acolytes, "the gowned nurses and midwifes" (James 317-8). Darcy refers to Theo's picture as "[Michel] Foucault's notion of the medical gaze" (97), a "dispersed, relational power", that "exert[s] dominance over the patient" (96). She explains that midwifes are part of this relational power, but she situates Miriam "within a history of midwifery that privileges women's understanding of their own bodies" (95). Miriam's support of Julian's decision to give birth out of the sight of the medical field confirms Darcy's claim. Miriam's historic placement is echoed by Theo in the narrative, when "he marvelled at Miriam, at the quiet confidence with which … she exercised her ancient art" (James 321). The portrayal of Miriam is that of a woman whose agency is located between categories of race and gender – an example of Lauren Lacey's fluid category of 'becoming', as was discussed in chapter 1. Her origins are Jamaican, but she is not marginalised by her race, because she is professional, educated, and competent in all her actions. Moreover, she is not defined by her gender, since she is single, childless, and acts rational and decisive. However, her profession places her in an exclusive female discourse, which considers childbirth to be a personal, and natural matter. In exercising her 'ancient art', she can be likened to a wise matriarch, who has a mystical connection with nature. Since such integral agency predates civilization, it is particularly suited to endure and succeed in a dystopian, post-civilization world.

 The Children of Men's third female character is Julian. She is defined by her unexpected pregnancy, a physical condition that has not been known to the world for twenty-

five years. She was in her twenties when Theo first encountered her as a one-time student of his class, and had impressed him with her critical intellect. Some years later, she seeks him out to persuade him to the cause of the Five Fishes. At their request, Theo confronts his cousin Xan with the group's concerns, but to no avail. Julian is a devout Christian, and married to Rolf. She dresses with fashion, and Theo considers her beautiful, with "a Pre-Raphaelite face. Rosetti would have liked to have painted her" (55). Unfortunately, her beauty is impaired by a deformed hand. Theo notes that "[t]he middle and forefinger were fused into a nail-less stump and the back of the hand grossly swollen" (55). The upside of her deformity is that because of it, she is exempted from the fertility examinations, which are part of the eugenic politics. The Warden and his council have decided that when fertile sperm is discovered, "the mothers will be carefully chosen for health, intelligence, no criminal record. We'll try to breed out the psychopathy" (146). Therefore, Julian's pregnancy escapes the attention of state surveillance, enabling her to choose anonymity instead of subjecting herself to the authorities. As argued in the previous paragraph, Soo Darcy claims that:

> In relation to the reproductive capacity of the female body, there is a further argument that the medicalisation of pregnancy has resulted in a specific power relation between practitioners and patients of obstetric and gynaecological medicine that renders pregnancy a condition of defect that needs to be observed, regulated and treated" (97).

In other words, pregnant women are treated as patients, and the rights of the unborn child often surpass those of the mother. Omega enforces the medical gaze, and the importance of the child, thereby annulling the agency of the mother. In *The Children of Men*, Theo confirms this, when he says that there is no one of importance in the world "who won't be concerned only for one thing: the safe birth of this child" (218). Julian, as mother, is not important, because she is merely a body of procreation. When Julian's husband abandons the group, Theo becomes the protector and provider of Julian, and assists Miriam with the birth of her son, the Alpha child. Finally, Theo kills the Warden in a Western-like shoot-out. The

symbolic power derived from Alpha is sufficient to silence any protest when, subsequently, he claims both the Wardenship and Julian. The events show that although Julian's agency is limited mostly to the agency of her sex throughout the narrative, she uses the symbolic power of her pregnancy to overrule her husband's leadership, to ensure Miriam's constant assistance, and to obtain Theo's allegiance. Her agency is tied up in her femininity, fertility and motherhood, which are traditional forms of female agency endorsed by religious, Christian culture. However, some aspects of her character diverge from familiar categories. Her femininity is diminished by her deformed hand, her virtue is subverted by her adultery, and her maternal capabilities are questioned when she chooses her privacy over professional care during pregnancy and childbirth. As the mother of Alpha, a broader future agency is within her reach, however, this will be limited by her partner Theo, the new Warden of England. Ultimately, her agency is derivative, and not intrinsic.

Considering the female characters in *The Children of Men* as described above, one can argue that they represent various states of the human response to a crisis, in this case the crisis of Omega. Helena's character represents denial, since she is determined to maintain a status quo that no longer exists, a golden simulacrum of England's past. Miriam's character represents acceptance, because she confronts dystopian reality with common sense, dignity and compassion. Lastly, as the opportunistic survivor, Julian represents adaptation. Quietly but skilfully, she manipulates the people that surround her, she 'lives in the moment', and finds happiness where she can. The dystopian setting generates some less familiar forms of female agency, besides traditional forms. However, in the female characters are not of radically transformed categories. The static character of Helena withdraws in the even more limited agency belonging to her middle-class, female category's core, while Miriam shows agency that surpasses both her categories of gender and race, thus transforming to a moderately hybrid category. Julian's agency is mostly defined by the religion's categorisation of gender, but dystopian duress forces her into the category of first mother. For now, Julian is

free to define her own category, because her a newly created category is not yet fixed by

social determinism.

Chapter 3: *Never Let Me Go*

Kazuo Ishiguro, author of *Never Let Me Go*, sets his story in an alternative last decade of the 20th century. The time set of the narrative coincides with the creation of sheep Dolly, the first successfully cloned sheep. As proposed by Susan Squier in the previous chapter, this timing may well be deliberate. At first, the differences between Ishiguro's speculative past and England's 1990s remain hidden. However, by a slow process of unveiling dystopian reality, the reader understands that the narrator, Kathy, is a human clone, who can never achieve the human category. Kathy's narrative conveys a passive melancholy which can be read as representing society's passive stance towards "the ramifications of organ transplant, such as organ-harvesting" (Toker and Chertoff 178). It causes the reader "to re-enact the gradual process of comprehension of this fate, … [and] the possibility of dystopian tentacles insidiously extending into familiar social practices", according to Leona Toker and Daniel Chertoff (178). *Never Let Me Go* deliberately veils dystopian reality by interweaving Kathy's narration with euphemisms. Clones are 'students', organs harvested are 'donations', and clones that have died are 'completed'. Clones have only one course of life, which is to become 'donors'. This sure end may be postponed for a period by being a 'carer', a 'buddy' for clones, someone who volunteers to support terminal patients. Nevertheless, nothing in the life of a clone is voluntary, since there is no autonomy. Their bodies are consumable, while their appearance is human, a fact that augments their repulsive effect on real humans. In his article "Caring Is a Gift: Gift Exchange and Commodification in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*", Mark Rollins notices that "it seems carers exist because normal humans possess a visceral disgust for the clones and also wish to avoid witnessing the cruel realities of the donation program at close range" (352). Avoidance of reality through a discursive system of euphemisms is part of the social conditioning to which clones are subjected from birth to death. The narrator of *Never Let Me Go* is a 'lucky' clone. Kathy is lucky because she grew up in Hailsham, a secluded estate that resembles a boarding school. Being 'from Hailsham'

defines her and her friends Tommy and Ruth, it makes them privileged compared to clones from other places. Hailsham' clones are educated, practice sports, and are continuously encouraged to express themselves through art. During this childhood, their reason for existence is explained to them, but, calculatedly timed and formulated. They are informed of certain facts when they are too young to fully comprehend, or concurrent with more exciting news that monopolises their attention. The deliberate veiling of the truth results in them being "told and not told" (79), or as Tommy explains to Kathy: "of course we'd take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly" (81). Kathy agrees that "[i]t *was* like we'd heard everything somewhere before" (81). This controlled interpellation prevents the clones from questioning, criticising, or rebelling against their destiny. Furthermore, the isolation of, and control over, the clones is made possible by the narrative's time span, running from the 1970s to the late 1990s, a period before the omnipresence of internet. The reader discovers that Hailsham was an exception in the treatment of clones, and that in other places, "students [were] being reared in deplorable conditions" (255). To defend their methods, Hailsham guardians presented the students' artwork as proof that clones had souls, therefore, humane treatment was justifiable and deserved. For this, 'Madame' visited Hailsham regularly, to collect the best work for her 'Gallery'. Her visits are vividly remembered by Kathy as one of the most exciting events of life in Hailsham, although their true purpose remained hidden. Next to the narrator Kathy, *Never Let Me Go* portrays more female than male characters. Of these females, the agency of the three most prominent is analysed: of the clones Kathy and her best friend Ruth, and of the human Miss Emily, head guardian of Hailsham.

Hailsham is closed when Kathy, thirty-one years old, starts her story. She is a successful carer, and takes pride in her professional success. She was given orders to start donating soon, and says: "though I'll miss being a carer, it feels just about right to be finishing at last come the end of the year" (4). She reminiscences about her early childhood in

Hailsham, about its parochial setting with duck pond and parkland, the house and outbuildings, sports fields, and sleeping dorms. Mostly, Kathy talks about the other students, especially about her friends Ruth and Tommy. She is a keen observer of their behaviour, and shows an uncanny insight in their thoughts and motives. Her observations show us a closed world of children who are educated, but not cared for, by the few adult guardians. It is a world of taboos, as is illustrated by Kathy's observation that the guardians "became so awkward whenever we came near this territory" of the students being different (69). One of the differences was that they could never have babies, but none of the students "was particularly bothered about it" (72). Kathy is part of a group of girls, of which Ruth is the leader. Their spare time is filled with gossiping, watching the boys, and playing out fantasies. Her friendship with Ruth is complicated, because Ruth is more volatile than other students. Ruth is manipulative, but Kathy usually sees through her stories and fibs. Most of the time she refrains from reacting, and often, she refuses to play along. Responses tend to be indirect, unspoken, or translated to symbolic gestures, echoing the veiled facts of life. The few times that Kathy confronts Ruth in private, or opposes her in public, she knows to expect retaliation. Her social empathy prevents most serious confrontations, but when she lets her guard down, Ruth sometimes catches her unawares. After one such incident, Kathy is "angry more at [her]self for having walked into it than at Ruth and the others" (54). Clearly, not being able to predict Ruth's behaviour affects her more than the behaviour itself. When Kathy observes Tommy, who is continuously teased, she decides to help him (11-15). They become friends, and discuss theories about the function of their artwork, from which the best items are carried away to a 'Madame's Gallery' (28-32). In contrast to her childhood in Hailsham with its constant companionship, Kathy takes up long, solitary walks after the move to 'the Cottages'. These foreshadow her future travelling through England as a carer, which solitude most clones dislike. In the Cottages, the clones read books, watch television, fantasise about an alternative future, and about their 'possibles'. Kathy explains: "Since each of us was copied at

some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life" (137). She has some one-night stands with various partners (126). Sex between clones is casual, without the taboos of human sex. Kathy remembers Miss Emily explaining during a sex lecture, that "[o]ut there people were even fighting and killing each other over who had sex with whom. And the reason it meant so much …: they could have babies from sex" (82). Because the clones' bodies are not reproductive, sex is considered almost as a pastime to satisfy sexual needs, or to confirm the status of being in a couple (125). Kathy feels very insecure about her sexuality because of her sudden 'urges'. She starts flipping through porn magazines, searching for her 'possible' in the pictures, a discovery which might explain her perverse sexuality (179). Later, when Ruth tells her that Tommy "doesn't see you like, you know, a proper girlfriend" (197), she decides to start her training as a carer and leaves the Cottages. The work as a carer suits her, although when a donor unexpectedly completes, "[f]or a while at least, you're demoralised" (203). She quite likes the solitude, which is illustrated by "the feeling of getting into my little car, knowing for the next couple of hours I'll have only the roads, the big grey sky and my daydreams for company" (204). In the previous chapter, we saw that female characters chose to avoid the 'medical gaze' upon their lives. For clones, this is an impossibility. They are subjected to the medical gaze from birth to death, and for Kathy, being a carer, she is not only subjected to it, but also part of it. The car rides are moments of autonomy, and a rare taste of human privilege. Another privilege is her autonomy in choosing her donors (206). Because of this, she becomes the carer for Ruth and Tommy. During this period, Kathy and Tommy discover that the students' artwork was not intended as proof of true love to justify a deferral of becoming donor (255). Therefore, postponement of death is impossible, and their purpose is unchanged, because ultimately, their love is not human. Kathy handles this deception in her controlled, passive way, in contrast to Tommy's anger fit. Despite Kathy's professional success as a carer, her passive nature prevents her from envisioning a human professional category. She

spends her life mitigating the limitations of the clone category for herself and others, thus only pursuing the category of carer.

The other female clone who is analysed is Ruth. She is a strong, manipulative character, the leader of a group of girls in Hailsham. She is imaginative, and likes to play make-believe stories by inventing elaborate strategies in which her friends become conspirators. When she is pleased, she gives small favours to her friends, or singles them out in conversation. However, when she is displeased, she excludes them from the group, temporarily or permanently. The girls follow her decisions, as is illustrated one time when Kathy says: "I realised everyone was waiting for Ruth's response – which was usually what happened whenever something a bit awkward came up" (15). Kathy recognises that it was part of "the sort of loyalty she inspired … in those days", in Hailsham (55). Ruth and Tommy had been a couple, and when they split up, some girls consider Kathy to be "the natural successor" (98). Cunningly, Ruth approaches Kathy to help her: "I haven't told anybody else about wanting to get back with Tommy. …You're the only one I trust" (101). Ruth makes use of her loyalty by saying: "You'll do it for us, won't you, Kathy? (103). When they arrive at the Cottages, Kathy observes that "[e]ven Ruth looked daunted that sunny day the minibus dropped us" (116). Ruth works hard to be accepted by the veteran students, and her imitation of them annoys Kathy. She remembers that "[t]here was one Ruth who was always trying to impress the veterans, who wouldn't hesitate to ignore me, Tommy, any of the others, if she thought we'd cramp her style", and there was the other Ruth, "the Ruth from Hailsham" (127). When they take a walk, they see a magazine advertisement of "this beautifully modern open-plan office with three or four people who worked in it having some kind of joke with each other. The place looked sparkling and so did the people (142). Ruth starts to fantasise about a future in such a place, discusses it with others, using lines from the advertisement, such as "dynamic, go-ahead types" (142). When veterans think to have seen Ruth's 'possible' in just such an office in Norfolk, they decide to visit. The visit turns out to be a deception,

because "the woman was too close, much closer than we'd ever really wanted", Kathy explains (161). The meeting confronts them with the insurmountable difference between human and clone. Ruth rages in her disappointment: "[i]f you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in the rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all came from" (164). Ruth's outburst blames the difference to status of category, pretending that the only lowest human categories are attainable for clones. However, the problem is that all human categories are foreclosed to clones. For this reason, the whole visit to Norfolk is avoided in conversations, together with all fantasies about alternative futures. During the last days of Ruth's life, Tommy and Kathy ask her why she hasn't tried to pursue her dream. Kathy asks:

> Don't you sometimes think, … you should have looked into it more? All right, you'd have been the first. The first one any of us would have heard of getting to do something like that. But you might have done it. Don't you wonder sometimes, what might have happened if you'd tried? (226).

Apparently, the other clones consider Ruth strong enough to change her future, to deviate from the set course of clone-life. In contrast to Kathy's passive empathy, and Tommy's inward bouts of frustration, Ruth is the only one to criticise their lives, and what it means to be a donor. When they discuss the unexpected early completion of a veteran, she says: "How could [they] possibly know what Chrissie would have felt? What she would have wanted? It wasn't [them] on that table, trying to cling onto life" (222). However, despite her relative strength, Ruth also admits that she "was pretty much ready when [she] became a donor. It felt right. After all, it's what we're *supposed* to be doing, isn't it?" (223). Social determinism prevents even Ruth from achieving any sort of agency outside the clone category.

Miss Emily, the head guardian, "was older than the others. She wasn't especially tall, but something about the way she carried herself, always straight with her head right up, made you think she was" (39). The students fear her, but they "recognised that it was her presence,

intimidating though it was, that made [them] all feel so safe at Hailsham" (39). She sometimes talks to herself, in front of the clones, or while pacing in an empty class room, but Ruth knows for sure, that "Miss Emily had an intellect you could slice logs with" (43). In a sense, Miss Emily embodies Hailsham, which "was full of hiding places, indoors and out: cupboards, nooks, bushes, hedges" (43). However, wherever they were hiding, Miss Emily would always find out "like she had some extra sense", and say "All right[, o]ut you come" (44), displaying her panoptical view of the building and its grounds. Kathy especially remembers Miss Emily's sex lecture, where she instructs the students with the aid of a skeleton. "She was going through all the nots and bolts of how you did it, what went in where, the different variations, like this was still Geography. Then suddenly, … she began telling us how we had to be careful *who* we had sex with", Kathy explains (82). Miss Emily warns the students that her liberal approach to sex deviates from how humans "in the outside world" feel about it, and that they must "respect the rules and treat sex as something pretty special" (82). This suggests that she means to instil a more human consideration of sex into the clones. In the final stage of the narrative, when Kathy and Tommy visit Madame, they discover that Miss Emily lives with her in the same house, and has become disabled. In answer to their plea for deferral, she admits that it was always just a rumour, "something for them [the clones] to dream about, a little fantasy. What harm is there?" (253). She explains how Hailsham was pivotal in changing the public opinion about clone treatment, "and now we're no more, things will only get worse" (255). Hailsham "demonstrated to the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being" (256). She tells them the real reason behind 'the Gallery', and when Kathy still does not understand why proof of their souls is needed, she remarks condescendingly: "It's touching, Kathy, to see you so taken aback. It demonstrates, in a way, that we did our job well. As you say, why would anyone doubt you had a soul?" (255). It is clear that she herself doubts, and her responses show that she does not

acknowledge Kathy and Tommy's emotions as integral to their person, but as the result of the education she had given them. She admits that all the guardians were afraid of the clones, that she herself "had to fight back [her] dread of [them] all almost every day" (264), but she had conquered those feelings of revulsion. This quote sums up Miss Emily's character as a woman who considers her personal feelings inferior to her political ideals. The professional accomplishments of the past still define her identity today. In her character, familiar female roles such as teacher and carer for children are combined with the emotional indifference of an intellectual, and scientist. Now that the political climate has changed, she is left impotent, and has lost her former agency as illustrated by her physical disability (250).

A clone's life-path is straight, narrow and short. In fact, the short lives of clones are the means of longevity for humans. The female clones display extreme limited agency, and can only dream or fantasise about life outside their category's parameters, as is illustrated by Madame saying:

> I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go (267).

Kathy's childish plea for a kind world is denied by the social determinism of her dystopian world. This social determinism forecloses any category other than the clone category. The total absence of resistance to their predestined lot suggests that clones are less vital than humans. This may also explain why examples of clones transforming to other categories are not mentioned. The extreme limitation of their category is illustrated by the fact that virtually no difference exists between the agency of a male, or a female clone. In other words, the clones differ in sex, but not in gender. Without reproductive abilities, their physical difference is an echo of their human descent, a means of producing organs for both human sexes. Except

for Miss Emily's explanation in the final stage of the narrative, little information can be gleaned about human politics, but the social structure of this dystopian world seems static and fixed, in parallel with the lives of clones. Only the experiment of Hailsham represents a politically divergent voice, and this experiment is finished, its subversion ended, and former politics are reinstated. This is accepted not only by Miss Emily, but also by Kathy, who denies herself even the agency to dream (282).

Conclusion

"No man is an island, entire of itself" (Donne, 1421). In 1624, John Donne used this line to

explain that in any society, no man can act autonomous, and neither can woman. Society

limits agency, either through the visible powers of discourse and political law, or through the

invisible powers of the discursive and interpellation. More importantly, a person's agency is

limited by other persons, who have power over, or are dependent on that person. Society, as

an intricate web of power relations, dictates limitations, and when that society is patriarchal,

man dictates woman. As a result, female categories have been more limited, more dependent,

and less varied than male categories over the centuries. Subsequently, to this day, female

agency is more limited too. Mary Wollstonecraft, who resisted patriarchal limitations, was

very aware of the interdependence of male and female roles in society, and devoted her life

and legacy to a less prejudiced balance between men and women. Her work has only recently

become part of the discursive, because patriarchal forces had prevented her work to contribute

to discourse (Greenblatt 211). Wollstonecraft proposed a change of political law to affect a

change in female agency. Her work is labelled as feminist utopian writing by Alessa Johns,

because it proposed alternative law in education by sketching its positive effects on future

society, but more importantly, on future people (179). Therefore, Wollstonecraft made the

political personal; by transforming political law, she sought to transform the female category.

However, society is not only comprised of political law, but also of cultural law, and it is this

law that is the object of feminist research. Judith Butler explains that the sex is used as the

foundation of the category of gender, but, she argues that gender is not biologically

determined. It is a constructed identity, thus culturally determined. This distinctness between

biological law and cultural law is the pivot on which this thesis revolves, because if Butler's

concept of gender is correct, then a change in culture must inevitably generate a change in

gender, and a transformation of gender should result in a transformation of its agency. A

cultural change can be depicted by a move to another country, or an introduction to foreign

people or customs. In dystopian literature, cultural change goes beyond familiar cultures of the past or present, it moves to the future, to another world, to an alien being, or to all of the above. This property makes dystopian literature an unlimited medium of social critique, as is argued in chapter 1. Moreover, since cultural change in dystopia is more radical, the possible transformation of categories and agency is expected to be more radical also. This research of dystopian literature supports this assumption, because it has unearthed forms female agency that deviate from any familiar agency in our Western world, both of male and female, as the following analysis will show.

Although no man is an island, Ballard's male characters in *High-Rise* strife to become just so by ignoring society's limitations. The high-rise forms a parallel world, a social experiment of its architect Royal, who "without realizing it, … had given these people a means of escaping into a new life, and a pattern of social organization that would become the paradigm of all future high-rise blocks" (96). By changing familiar culture into an extreme, urban social paradigm, Ballard explores and extends its degenerate effect on men and women. Ironically, this survival of the fittest evolves in a progressively less urban, and more primitive world. Professional lives, part of the outside world, are abandoned and forgotten except for their class component. The male survivors, stripped of all the modern comforts of urban life, regress to more primitive, and predatory categories, like hunter, rapist, and killer. Initially, the female characters are of familiar categories, the category of wife, mother, and teacher. Although they resist at first, they too regress to primitive categories. However, their survival is not due to physical strength, but to the forming of a sinister sisterhood, that conspires against the men. Ballard has reversed roles, by creating a brutalist matriarchy, but, his change of politics does not become personal, because his characters' motives are not clear. However, the change does result in a radical transformation of female gender since the women's agency has been extended to hunting, killing, and cannibalism, and, more importantly, their agency is no longer limited by men. In *The Children of Men*, society is still patriarchal, although man

cannot father a child. After twenty-five years of male infertility, James' dystopian British society is still familiar, but is has become a more listless, and reactionary version of its former self. James' novel can be read as a warning against modern values, against the "more liberal attitudes to birth control and abortion, the postponement of pregnancy by professional women pursuing their careers, the wish of families for a higher standard of living" (10). Infertility causes Helena, one of the female characters, to reduce herself to a limited form of female domesticity. In contrast, Miriam's overlapping categories of female, ethnic, and supporting professional category are broadened with some features that are usually connected with the male category. Julian, the third female character which was analysed in *The Children of Men*, depicts a religious female category. Transformed by iconic motherhood, she becomes a dystopian simile of mother Mary. The fact that gender still has the same cultural significance although it is no longer connected to biological sex, supports Butler's notion of gender as a culturally constructed identity. The agency of the researched female characters can still be categorised as familiar, because the dystopian society of *The Children of Men* is still a familiar one. The dystopian society of *Never Let Me Go* appears to be a familiar past as well, but gradually, it becomes more and more unfamiliar. This is due to the introduction of the new, unfamiliar category of clones. Miss Emily, the human female character, initially shows a mixed agency of male and female categories. She is head of a school, and of a political movement, as well as a teacher and carer for children. When the school is closed, and politics reversed, she is stripped of her male agency. Nevertheless, her human female category is still superior to the clone category. Because clone agency shows many similarities to historically limited female agency, Kathy's very personal life story causes only a slight distortion of familiar society. However, the total impotence of a clone's life is not only illustrated by their inherent infertility, but mostly by the total lack of difference between the male and female clones. It is this absence in gender-related treatment of clones in the dystopian society of *Never Let Me Go* that foregrounds the pervasive presence of gender-related treatment in real

society. The transformation of female category is absent, but instead, a transformation of the male category draws the attention to the effects of dystopian culture on gender.

The researched dystopian novels depict female characters in the familiar categories of wife, mother, nanny, teacher, midwife, and sister. By adopting male agency, some of these characters change to a less familiar female category; that of leader, counsellor, rebel, political activist, or even hunter, and killer. Although less familiar, they are still recognisable in present society, and in literature in general. However, next to these categories, some female characters show agency which depicts more radical categories such as saviour, matriarch, witch, cannibal, or clone. These radical categories can only exist by the grace of the author's dystopian world. Therefore, this research argues that the radical social structure of the dystopian world causes radically transformed female gender categories. This radical transformation of category expresses itself in the agency performed by the female characters, and although such female agency only exists in the speculative world, it opens doors in the real world. Dystopian female characters become part of discourse, and by their speculative existence they expose political injustice, and express social critique. As part of the discursive, they undermine social determinism by weakening the reader's internalised resistance to change in cultural construction. Dystopia's transformed and hybrid gender categories offer a wider variety of gender than the traditional male – female dichotomy, and may help to remove cultural markers from any non-male category. Since the 20th century, dystopian narratives have progressively introduced subversive female roles in both academic and popular culture. Not only the perception of the feminine has positively benefited from this, but also the perception of other marginalised groups has changed. The acceptance, and moreover, the popularity of dystopia's wide variety of female models, especially in young adult fiction and film, has generated some academic interest. A wider focus of academic research in other categories, whether marginalised or not, can result in a deeper insight in dystopia's property

of transforming category. It may establish that critical dystopia is an important force in

changing cultural construction of gender towards a more equal agency for man and woman.

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