



Reproductive Nostalgia

Pregnancy and Birth in Dystopian Fiction

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In this detailed comparative analysis, Genevieve Gordon configures Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* as latter-day feminist responses to the nostalgic and arguably regressive yearning for natural birth and childrearing seen in classic dystopias – here represented by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*. This essay was written for Bad Space: Rhetorics of Place in Dystopian Fiction & Film with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

AMONG THEIR MANY PURPOSES, the terrifying worlds built by dystopian texts serve to reflect the cultural fears and tensions of their genetic contexts. Often, what a dystopian regime seeks to rid its society of is indicative of what the text's audience or creator is terrified of losing; in this way, the selective presences and absences in dystopian fiction represent what is considered truly important and worthy of preservation. Perhaps this is why problems of reproduction and childbirth figure so prominently into so many of the hallmark pieces of the dystopian canon—the processes of childbirth and parenting are among humanity's most sacred rituals. In many of these texts, the condemnation or criminalization of natural childrearing connotes an alienation from

humanity in general, making it an avenue by which to reconvene with humanness.

There are two general trends treating the issues of childbirth and reproduction in dystopia. The first is that of many of the core texts of the old dystopian canon, which revolve around the aforementioned anxiety about losing touch with the “natural” elements of humanness through developments in science that make childbirth unnecessary. These works, most notably Aldus Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, hold birth and parenting as sacred institutions, the threatening of which can rob a society of its humanity. In these dystopias, birth and parenting become taboo subjects, and a woman’s desire to become a mother becomes a rebellious instinct. Conversely, more modern dystopias approach these issues from a different perspective: that of the women on whose bodies this burden of natural human connection falls. These feminist dystopias, including Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the postapocalyptic, cinematic dystopia of 2015’s *Mad Max: Fury Road*, flip the script to question the romantic worship of childbirth and speculate on the dangers of a return to “traditional values” that Huxley and Zamyatin foreshadow. Comparison between these two general ideological treatments of reproduction reveals differences between the values of the old dystopian canon and new, feminist dystopias, as well as suggesting distinction between male-centric and female-centric speculative fiction.

The themes of family and sexual desire in dystopian fiction are symptoms of an overwhelming preoccupation with nature and the natural. This is what Gorman Beauchamp calls “cultural primitivism,” the reaction to overly logical, overly civilized civilization that sets the “‘natural’ man against the rigid and reductionist rationalism of utopia” (88). The desire to reconvene with nature comes from a paranoia about excessive development of industry, science, and technology and their capacity to usurp the role of the individual. Spaces like the wilderness outside the Green Wall in *We* and Mal-

pais in *Brave New World* serve as preserved specimens of the primitive natural world that protagonists trapped in emotionless regimes can yearn for and escape to. While there is a lack of research regarding the role of childbirth in dystopian fiction, there is extensive commentary on the dystopian obsession with sex and how it relates to this nostalgic, naturalistic tendency. Dystopian scholars frequently discuss the role of woman characters in dystopian novels as sexual catalysts for rebellion and revolution. In “Revolutions from the Waist Downwards,” Thomas Horan suggests that these texts highlight the differences between the male and female body, allowing rational, logical male characters to be emotionally and sexually persuaded. “The female body reflects a mysterious, ungovernable, potentially dangerous space,” he writes, “offering always the possibility of upheaval and renewal” (322). Female fecundity and pregnancy represent potentiality and promise; a pregnant woman in a dystopian narrative extends the timeline of the text to the future, beyond the novel’s confines, to the next generation. Additionally, dystopian criticisms of artificial reproduction and government-controlled childrearing are so prominent because of the societal, supposedly natural sacredness of the family institution. Utopian scholar Bruce Christensen attributes this dystopian obsession with preserving the family unit to a reaction against the “utopian assault against marriage and the family” (34). He contrasts utopian ideals of communal parenting and shared spouses like those expressed in texts like Plato’s *Republic* with the importance placed on the family in the book of Genesis (33-34). Dystopian fiction sees a danger in minimizing the importance of emotional attachment and family bonding, while the utopias they retaliate against see collectivization and government involvement as rational and progressive.

Aside from its tangential relationships to primitivism, sexual politics, and family relationships in dystopian fiction, there is little scholarship on the actual function of pregnancy in these narratives. In its place, feminist theories on reproduction and body experience

are extremely useful in deciphering the ways feminist dystopias reconfigure the role of pregnancy. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir expresses a much grimmer opinion of the processes of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood. Pregnant, a woman becomes “ensnared by nature,” she writes, and becomes “plant and animal, a stock-pile of colloids, an incubator, an egg” (495). Although a woman may feel like she is doing something grand and productive with her body, she has really become “life’s passive instrument” possessed by a “parasite” of a fetus against which her body constantly revolts (498). De Beauvoir paints a picture of pregnancy and birth that is far from the beautiful and miraculous representation it gets elsewhere. She continually characterizes these processes as “animal,” but also “terrifying” and “morbid.” A pregnant woman becomes neither subject nor object, but a passive means of existence for the fetus; society “invests it,” de Beauvoir writes, “with a sacred character,” giving the woman a sense of humanity and productivity when, in fact, she has none (496). The misconception of maternal instincts and love as natural leads to the gross manipulation of women. “A social and artificial morality is hidden beneath this pseudo-naturalism,” she asserts, “that the child is the supreme aim of women is a statement having precisely the same value of an advertising slogan” (523). To de Beauvoir, women suffer at the hands of nature, rather than gain autonomy from it as men do.

A strangely similar sentiment about birth finds a voice through the totalitarian regimes of the old-canon dystopian novels: a dismissal of natural birth as base, dangerous, and disgusting. In no text is this more heavily discussed than in *Brave New World*; childbirth is associated with “diseases” and “endless isolating pain” that are avoided by bypassing the natural birth process with science (41). Huxley goes to great pains to explain that birth has not only fallen out of favor and been replaced by eugenic cloning, but the very concepts of parenthood and mothering have become social taboos. The word “mother” is a vulgar curse word, while children are encouraged to sexually experiment from an early age; the sacred is replaced with

the perverse, and sex is alienated from biological notions of family and lineage. The relationship between mother and child, along with sexual monogamy and family in general, is rejected because it is selfish and illogically passionate. “Try to imagine,” Mustapha Mond lectures to onlooking students, “what it was like to have a *viviparous* mother” (Huxley 36). “What suffocating intimacies, what dangerous, obscene relationships between the members of the family group!” (37). The use of the word “viviparous” here, repeated frequently throughout the novel as an expression of disgusting naturalness, likens pregnant women to breeding captive animals.

Part of what distinguishes John the Savage from the characters around him is his having experienced a mother-child relationship; this gives him a psychological depth of character that the others lack (Christensen 35). This distinction serves to more fully associate birth and motherhood with naturalness and primitivity. Combined with his obsession with Shakespeare, this makes John a nostalgic representative of the past who, like the readers, finds himself unable to comprehend the society Huxley has fabricated. *Brave New World* does not provide an outright rejection of civilization and progress; with its violence and danger, Malpais is no Edenic utopia, either. The suspicion of genetic science is pervasive, however, and extremist versions of birth control and abortion procedures present a skeptical view of medical interference with natural reproduction.

Predating even *Brave New World*, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s 1921 novel *We* represents a cultural anxiety about losing the emotional connections involved in the entire reproductive process. Pregnancy is highly regulated, and children are raised by the One State in a “Children-Rearing Factory” (107). While the reader is not given an extensive description of test-tube eugenic processes as in Huxley’s novel, *We* expresses the fear of bureaucratic invasion into the private and sacred family institution. The confessional thoughts of the narrator, D-503, convey a mourning of maternal bonds as he gradually realizes the bleakness of his surrounding society. “If only I had a mother like the Ancients: my—yes, exactly—my own mother,” he

laments, “she would know me” (189). The narratives of mothering and biology culminate in the character of O-90, deemed too short to have a baby by the One State. Eventually, her overwhelming maternal desire overrides her respect for the law, and she begs D-503 to impregnate her illegally. He does so and helps transport her outside the Green Wall that separates their hyper-logical and modern world from the nature outside. O-90’s narrative paints pregnancy as the overwhelming biological desire of womankind, and her pregnancy becomes a rebellious act against a regime that seeks to eliminate impulse and feeling of all sorts. Once pregnant, she exclaims to D-503, “I am so happy—so happy. . . . I am full—you see—full to the brim” (149). When describing her pregnant body, our narrator imagines a scene of “springtime over there, in the green thickets,” where “new sprouts fight their way through the earth just as stubbornly—to yield branches and leaves and to blossom as quick as they can” (149). What is happening in O-90’s body is a symptom and manifestation of the erotic and primitive earth.

Her escape to the area outside the Green Wall, though her exact fate is uncertain, is bestowed with a primitive optimism; she avoids the disastrous fate of Zamyatin’s other characters and completes the “return to nature” that so many dystopian narratives endorse. This rebellious motherhood trope appears again in 1971 in George Lucas’s sci-fi dystopia *THX 1138*, where similar restrictions on intimacy and reproduction ensure the continuation of a Huxleyesque breeding situation. Here, the rebellious pregnancy is not a manifestation of inward primitive maternalism, as in O-90’s case, but a representation of forbidden love and an uncertain future. These women become heroes of their narratives—they become rebels, martyrs—for desiring and acting upon traditional notions of maternalistic femininity that coincide with the hegemonic social norms of Zamyatin’s and Lucas’s authorial contexts, which these dystopias express fear of losing.

The treatments of pregnancy, childbirth, and maternal relationships in the narratives of Huxley, Zamyatin, and Lucas hold up these

traits and processes as core tenets of the human experience and that are at risk of being lost in their own contexts. There runs through these texts an overarching fear of rapid modernization that will leave the natural world and its primitive knowledge behind. The threat of idealistic, totalitarian, communal parenting threatens the relationship between mothers and children; advances in genetic science and birth control question the necessity of natural birth as a consequence of sex. Characters like D-503, who long for a maternal relationship, and those like O-90, who yearn to feel the sense of purpose that accompanies pregnancy, are representative of real human need—this is what makes these novels so compelling. However, they are also instruments of a rhetorical cause that borders on a dangerous nostalgia for pre-science, pre-sexual-liberation ideology. This nostalgia accompanies an assumption that what is natural is preferable, and what is natural is for women to bear children.

Whether it was what Huxley or Zamyatin would have endorsed is uncertain, but the return to “old-fashioned” reproductive ideology for which the classic dystopian canon mourned emerged in the late twentieth century with the rampant conservatism of the 1980s. Alongside the Reagan administration came loaded rhetorical terms like “family values,” symbolizing a widespread disdain of non-“traditional” behavior from homosexuality to birth control to abortion. Backed by powerful political and religious institutions, this movement was operating at full force in 1986 when Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* was published, making what takes place in the Republic of Gilead even more believable. As dystopian scholar Peter Fitting points out, “this renewed regulation of women’s bodies—for ‘breeding purposes’—marks the triumph of the Moral Majority and its ‘family protection’ agenda” (144). Margaret Atwood’s novel serves as an interesting feminist counterpoint to the desire for the “natural” of Huxley and Zamyatin. It asks the question: what happens when birth, a natural function of a woman’s body, is valued so much that it becomes the woman’s destined, exclusive purpose and a tool

by which society exercises a nostalgic impulse towards revived patriarchy? For Handmaids like Offred, this is the case. Offred, like O-90, yearns to inhabit the pregnant body—but for her, it’s so she might avoid exile and death.

In Gilead, an ideology like the nostalgia expressed through *Brave New World* and *We* surfaces in the religious explanations used to justify the treatment of the handmaids. The biblical story of Rachel and her handmaid, Bilhah, is repeated to Offred on each sexual ceremony day to urge the heroic, honorable, and sacrificial nature of her work. These verses stress the natural, divined purpose of a woman’s body, the debt she must pay to her species for being born female. Through this ritual, the patriarchal structure of Gilead represents real-world ideology, what Dorian Cirrone identifies as “cultural scripts on reproduction and mothering” that cause women to “unwittingly sustain their own positions of subordination and eventual enslavement” (6). In “Millennial Mothers,” Cirrone suggests that *The Handmaid’s Tale* masterfully shows how these assumptions about pregnancy and birth as the natural functions of a woman’s body—and the subsequent control of those bodies that results—can be so easily justified by ideology and can, in turn, perpetuate those cultural paradigms (5). As forward-thinking as some elements of Huxley and Zamyatin’s work are, their novels are still complicit in this sort of abstraction of women’s roles.

In Atwood’s dystopia, natural reproduction is not a beautiful tool for reconvening with a primitive consciousness, but a means by which the power structure exercises social control of women. These women become reproductive vessels, the “incubators” that Simone de Beauvoir warns about, trapped by their bodies’ natural functions rather than empowered by them. Offred’s first-person narrative is not anti-motherhood in the slightest; throughout the novel she mourns for the daughter she had before the establishment of Gilead. Pregnancy, as de Beauvoir suggests, “ought to be freely willed” and not determinate of a woman’s value or purpose (522). The novel also

acknowledges the suspicion of science and medicine that accompanies a return to “traditional” reproductive values; among those publicly hung with bags over their heads are doctors accused of performing abortions. The Handmaids live in constant fear of delivering a deformed or dead “unbaby,” yet are denied access to developments in medicine that could prevent these dangerous mishaps.

The dystopian trope whereby women become breeders in sex slavery appears again nearly thirty years after Atwood’s novel in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, a postapocalyptic action film which, while directed by a man, George Miller, has won acclaim for its feminist revision of a predominately male genre. In an environment ruined by excessive capitalism and nuclear disaster, the tyrant Immortan Joe holds all resources from the starving, emaciated populous. Among these resources is a harem of “prize breeders,” imprisoned as reproductive slaves, and “milking mothers” whose breastmilk is used for the general public’s sustenance. The film follows a strong woman warrior, Furiosa, who helps the breeders escape their captivity and search for a matriarchal utopia. Like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the film cautions against the treatment of fertility and the female body as natural resources akin to water or fuel. *Fury Road* is an especially Marxist take on this issue; as Taylor Boulware asserts in her analysis of the film, it exposes and rejects “the reduction of certain bodies into commodities” (7). Along with Atwood’s work, it suggests that in times of extreme scarcity, women bear the responsibility of continuing the species, literally becoming a natural resource to be protected and consumed. As opposed to O-90’s pregnancy which allows her to feel human, the breeders’ escape from Immortan Joe allows them to reclaim their bodies through their choice *not* to be reproductive vessels.

The ways that Margaret Atwood’s dystopia and *Fury Road* diverge from the standard, romanticized treatment of birth and reproduction in the classic canonical dystopian texts not only reflects a shift in perception of these issues over time, but also suggest larger differences between speculative fiction based on men and women.

The nostalgia and cultural primitivism that drives Huxley and Zamiatin to center issues of reproduction in their novels carries with it dangerous assumptions that ignore the experiences of women. The patriarchies of Gilead and *Fury Road* are exaggerations, as are most dystopian settings, but they are reactions to the genre's concerning tendency to romanticize the "traditional values" of the past. As feminist dystopias suggest, the past was not kind to women; the dystopia crafted in *The Handmaid's Tale* is not an abstract, hyper-technological future civilization, but a past one rooted in religious nostalgia for strict, patriarchal gender segregation. For women, progress and science are optimistic, and male-centric retreatism, where maternity is considered the sole biological drive of woman, is the true dystopia. ▶▶

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