Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Fiction

Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Fiction:

Fire Is Being Eaten

By

Sławomir Kuźnicki

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Fiction: Fire Is Being Eaten

By Sławomir Kuźnicki

Refereed by Ilona Dobosiewicz and Jacek Gutorow

This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8367-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8367-2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people:

Margaret Atwood, for her inspiring novels, not only the four ones I focus on in this book;

Prof. Ilona Dobosiewicz, for her immense help and for being the motivating force at various stages of this project;

Prof. Jacek Gutorow and prof. Tadeusz Lewandowski, as well as prof. Mariusz Marszalski, for their critical reading of this manuscript and for all their helpful suggestions;

Prof. Joanna Czaplińska and prof. Andrzej Ciuk, as well as prof. Elżbieta Szymańska-Czaplak, for their faith in me;

Anna Kuźnicka and Emilia Kuźnicka, for their love, patience and being-there-for-me;

Elżbieta Kuźnicka-Sołtysik and Zdzisław Sołtysik, as well as Zofia Chorążyczewska and Czesław Chorążyczewski, for their parental care;

Bartosz Suwiński and Agata Haas, for everlasting inspirations, unforgettable adventures, and shared experiences.

CHAPTER ONE

CONTEXT IS ALL

More and more frequently the edges
of me dissolve and I become
a wish to assimilate the world.

(Margaret Atwood, "More and More," *Eating Fire*, 49)

Margaret Atwood's Immersion in the World's Problems

The phrase "context is all," uttered by Offred from *The Handmaid's Tale*, gives the title to this introductory chapter.[1] It is crucial not only to her position in the book's fundamentalist dystopia, but also to reading all Margaret Atwood's works: "I think it's probably a motto for human society," she has commented.[2] Thus contexts of different sorts—feminism, nationalism, postcolonialism, environmental issues, to enumerate just a few of the most prominent ones—shape Atwood's literary output and define her as a writer. Since her poetic and fiction debuts in the 1960s, she has been undertaking literary tasks both interesting from the formal point of view, and influential as far as their ethical content is concerned. "Writers are eye-witnesses, I-witnesses," as she once explained the duty that seems to be inscribed in her profession, personalising the politics of the day.[3] The moral duty Atwood writes about throughout all her literary career, and with increasing commitment, could be termed radical humanism: "from her early disclaimers of aspiration to a political voice, her frequent statements that 'books don't save the world,' she has moved

[1] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 1996), 154.
[2] Jonathan Noakes, and Margaret Reynolds, Margaret Atwood: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature (London: Vintage, 2002), 14.
[3] Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), 203.

steadily to a firm commitment to human rights and the conviction that if books, in fact, don't save the world, then nothing else can either."[4]

This book explores Atwood's concepts and ideas gathered around the three contextual and changing roles I consider of greatest importance not only to her, but to the surrounding world, as well. These are: science, women and religion. Such an outline of the analysis both emphasises the superiority of substance over composition in Atwood's novels, and demonstrates her immersion in worldly issues, i.e. in the web of cultural contexts. However, each of the three fields of my analysis includes literary material from those of Atwood's works that could be described as realisations of her speculative fiction project, or, to put it simply, her dystopian novels. Thus, I concentrate on the following books: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013), in which the author generally places the action in the future, experimenting with the aforementioned genre of dystopia. All of these books were written and published during the last three decades, which makes their cultural context contemporary. In other words, these particular novels function within the broad contemporary context of culture, which corresponds with Fiona Tolan's comments about the Canadian author: "The novelist absorbs influences form his or her culture, and these influences interact in a manner at once unpredictable and generative, whereby the pure theory that is absorbed undergoes a process of contamination and manipulation by the novel."[5]

Since contextual analysis of Atwood's works is desirable, it is worth presenting the author's brief literary profile. Born in 1939, in Ottawa, Canada, Margaret Atwood is a highly prolific writer who, by the end of 2016, has published 16 novels, 10 collections of short stories, 17 poetry volumes, 4 e-books, 7 children's books, television scripts, libretti, literary and cultural criticism, as well as numerous essays, reviews, and forewords. With her works translated into about forty languages, she has established her literary reputation as the most prominent Canadian writer. It was in Canada where she spent much of her formative years (mainly in the backwoods of Northern Quebec, where her father, an entomologist, did his field research); it was also in Canada, namely the University of Toronto, where she finished her undergraduate studies in 1961. Indeed, the Canadian experience seems to have influenced her both as a human being and as a writer, and she has returned to various aspects of her Canadiannes

[4] Barbara Hill Rigney, *Women Writers: Margaret Atwood* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987), 16.

[5] Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 3.

throughout her whole literary career, e.g., in 1972 she published the acclaimed survey of Canadian literature, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. However, the scope of interests she expresses in her writings does not limit her to Canadiannes only.

As a novelist, Atwood debuted in 1969 with *The Edible Woman*, a feminist novel that helped establish her significance not only in Canada. In the next four novels—*Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), and *Bodily Harm* (1981)—she continued to explore feminist matters. At the same time, these books marked Atwood's growing interest in the issues that would later be considered important to her, like feminism. They include: ecology, relationships between children and their parents, and pornography. These novels also helped to spread her popularity and significance, because in the case of Atwood these two always go together, no matter how unpleasant the topic she undertakes in her prose. Nevertheless, her breakthrough novel was *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which won two important literary awards (the 1987 Arthur C. Clarke Award and 1985 Governor General's Award), and was shortlisted for another (the 1986 Booker Prize). Subsequent novels have confirmed Atwood's significant position in contemporary literature, all of them exploring new thematic territories, as well as providing the writer with more literary awards. The first of them is *Cat's Eye* (1988), in which Atwood draws on her childhood and teenage years to present the way Canada changed throughout the twentieth century. This book was shortlisted for the 1988 Governor General's Award and the 1989 Booker Prize. In *The Robber Bride* (1993), Atwood concentrates on female–female relationships, ironizing about such issues as female friendship and solidarity. This book was a finalist for the 1994 Governor General's Award and the James Tiptree, Jr. Award. It was followed by *Alias Grace* (1996), the winner of the 1996 Giller Prize, again a finalist for the 1996 Booker Prize and the 1996 Governor General's Award, as well as shortlisted for the 1997 Orange Prize for Fiction. It was Atwood's first historical novel, exploring the 1843 murders of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery, in Upper Canada, but focusing on Grace Marks, their servant, who was convicted of the crime and sentenced to life in imprisonment. With *The Blind Assassin* (2000), Atwood finally won the Booker Prize; additionally, the book was awarded the 2001 Hammett Prize, and was shortlisted for the 2000 Governor General's Award and the 2001 Orange Prize for Fiction. Being a postmodern roman à clef and historical fiction about the 1930s and 1940s Toronto (although narrated from the present-day perspective), the novel also includes elements of pulp science-fiction in the form of a novel within a novel. One

of Atwood's most ambitious books, *The Blind Assassin*, also demonstrates her growing interest in popular culture. This element dominates the novels constituting the *MaddAddam* trilogy—all of them very successful both commercially and artistically, which is exemplified by the literary honours they have earned. *Oryx and Crake* (2003) was shortlisted for the 2003 Booker Prize, the 2003 Governor General's Award, and the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction; *The Year of the Flood* (2009) was longlisted for the 2011 IMPAC Award; finally, *MaddAddam* (2013) was awarded Goodreads Choice for Best Science Fiction 2013. Additionally, in 2005, between *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood published *The Penelopiad*, a novella in which she rewrote the major events of *The Odyssey* using the female perspective of the nominal Penelope, Odysseus' wife. This short book was nominated for the 2006 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature and the 2007 IMPAC Award. In 2014, she wrote the novel *Scribbler Moon*, but it will not be published until 2114, being a part of the Future Library project. *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) confirms Atwood's growing anxiety about the current political and social situation because it is another book in a series envisioning negative future scenarios, this time with a surprisingly notable amount of the elements of dark comedy. Her last novel is *Hag-Seed* (2016), published in the Random House series of contemporary retellings of William Shakespeare's plays, Atwood's choice being the great playwright's last individually written dramatic text, *The Tempest*. However, knowing her literary and political activity as well as her vigour, we should not treat the novel as the Canadian's farewell.

As I have shown in this short discussion of her works, since her novelistic debut in 1969 (as well as her poetic debut in 1961 with the volume *Double Persephone*), Atwood has shown that she does not intend to restrict herself to national matters only.[6] Quite the contrary, alert to the shifting contemporary worldwide geopolitical situation, she has undertaken in her writing such current issues as women's position in the world, ecological concerns, and the possible future of contemporary high-tech societies. Being a cautious observer of the world, she does not avoid criticising dangerous tendencies, or warning of their possible consequences.

[6] In the "Preface" to the second edition of *Survival* Atwood states: "I wouldn't write *Survival* today, because I wouldn't need to. The thing I set out to prove has been proven beyond a doubt: few would seriously argue, any more, that there is no Canadian literature. For a country with the population of Illinois or Mexico City, we've done more than well—we've done spectacularly" (*Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 2004, 11).

At the same time, in her novels one can detect the traces of romance, historical fiction, a pseudo-autobiography, dystopian fiction, and science fiction. As a novelist, she is open not only to new thematic challenges, but also to the possibilities stemming from a given literary form. Hence, to decode and understand her ideas fully, it is necessary to approach them in their form. Consequently, this is what I intend this book to be: an attentive, contextual analysis of Atwood's selected novels that takes into consideration the generic factor; an analysis that investigates how the links between her prose and worldly matters operate and what the Canadian writer's moral intentions are. It is also to answer the question of what generic forms she employs to achieve her aims, and why she does so. Finally, this monograph shows that Atwood's work, so deeply rooted in culture, changes together with the way the surrounding world does, making her work a flexible and lively subject of such an analysis. Consequently, investigating the worldly matters of Atwood's fiction requires a method that emphasises its immersion in the external and contemporary world, a method open to both the formal and ethical aspects of the object of critical investigation, a method oriented towards various contexts present in a literary piece of work.

Edward W. Said's Concept of Worldliness

The contextual method of reading literature definitely corresponds with the notion of worldliness proposed by Edward W. Said (1935–2003), the Palestinian American literary theorist and public intellectual best known for his substantial contribution to the postcolonial critical theory. He states in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*: "My position is that texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted."[7] In this sense, worldliness may become the motor of a cultural analysis of various realities and power relations, which "are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics."[8] To a great extent, Said's stance mirrors the words of Clifford Geertz, who states: "Believing that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law

[7] Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 4.
[8] Said, *The World*, 5.

but an interpretive one in search of meaning."[9] Hence, meanings are interrelated with the world in which they are created. As Said continues: "Words and texts are so much of the world that their effectiveness, in some cases even their use, are matters having to do with ownership, authority, power, and the imposition of force."[10] Literary texts are supposed to be created within a complicated web of contexts—political, sexual, etc.—with which they should engage in critical argument. What is interesting here is the fact that Said understands his concept as multifaceted—concerning not only literary critics and general readers, but producers of texts, as well: "writing is not free, nor is it performed uniquely by a sovereign writer who writes more or less as he or she pleases. Writing belongs to a system of utterances that has all sorts of affiliative, often constricting relationships with the world of nations, as Vico called it."[11] A writer, then, is selectively and critically open to what the contemporary world has to offer. Said specifies: "The point is that texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly. Whether a text is preserved or put aside for a period, whether it is on a library shelf or not: these matters have to do with a text's being in the world."[12] In my opinion, this immersion of texts in the external world suits Margaret Atwood's literary activity perfectly. She describes her concerns in the following way: "Politics in the sense of who has the power and how people behave. That's what politics is and that is also what novel writing is about. Politics in the widest sense affects everybody. So writers write about human thought, behaviour, action, even when they're writing fantasy."[13]

Thus, according to Atwood, a writer is someone who in their writings always refers to the current power relations, trying to refute their totalising and unjust effects. In other words, as Said puts it, a writer is an intellectual with a moral duty "to speak the truth to power."[14] He understands this critical attitude in the following way:

---

[9] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.
[10] Said, *The World*, 48.
[11] Edward W. Said, *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, edited by Gauri Viswanathan (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 24.
[12] Said, *The World*, 35.
[13] Peter O'Brien, ed., *So to Speak: Interviews with Contemporary Canadian Writers*, (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1987), 176–77.
[14] Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 97.

> The goal of speaking the truth is mainly to project a better state of affairs and one that corresponds more closely to a set of moral principles—peace, reconciliation, abatement of suffering—applied to the known facts. Certainly in writing and speaking, one's aim is not to show everyone how right one is but rather to try to induce a change in the moral climate.[15]

Therefore, a writer has an obligation to humanity, which should not be limited to providing readers with mere entertainment. Standing for a voice that is heard, a writer is an intellectual whose duty is to represent the repressed, the humiliated, and the unheard. He elaborates on this thought:

> The intellectual is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business. The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'etre* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.[16]

Consequently, such an uncompromising attitude requires an unshakable moral position that cannot change just for the sake of feeling comfortable. Quite the contrary, a writer's stance is the reversal of comfort, both when it comes to them and their audiences. Only then can a writer's goal be fulfilled, the goal consisting in "advance[ing] human freedom and knowledge."[17] To do so, then, a writer must operate in their time and space, always referring to their contemporary problems and controversies, because "literature is produced in time and in society by human beings, who are themselves agents of, as well as somewhat independent actors within, their actual history."[18]

Atwood seems to match Said's definition of an intellectual perfectly. In her texts, she relates to numerous contemporary problems, and since she has been writing for more than forty years, her idea of contemporariness constitutes a vast realm reflected in different critical readings of her works. For example, Nathalie Cooke points at Atwood's three main interests:

---

[15] Said, *Representations*, 99–100.
[16] Said, *Representations*, 11.
[17] Said, *Representations*, 17.
[18] Said, *The World*, 152.

"environmental awareness, Canadian nationalism, and feminism,"[19] whereas Linda Hutcheon places Atwood in "both the feminist and postmodern contexts."[20] Coral Ann Howells adds that Atwood's self-consciousness as a writer derives from her "interest in the dynamic powers of language and story."[21] Barbara Hill Rigney meanwhile points out the myth and fairy tale elements in her writing.[22] Taken together, these themes do not encapsulate the broad cross-section of Atwood's literary interests. Moreover, the considerable time span of her life as an artist makes it impossible to view all of those themes as one-dimensional. The themes evolve as Atwood matures both as a writer, and, what is even more crucial, as a human being. Hence, it is justified to look at those thematic areas, focusing on their specific and altering cultural contexts, since, as Howells points out, "as a political writer, [Atwood] is interested in an analysis of the dialects of power and shifting structures of ideology."[23] In this book, therefore, I focus on three of Atwood's worldly motifs that are crucial in the twenty-first century. These are the motifs of science, women and religion. My reading of Atwood's works seems to suit the contemporariness of the analytic processes. To cite Said one more time:

> Criticism in short is always situated; it is skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings. This is by no means to say that it is value-free. Quite the contrary, for the inevitable trajectory of critical consciousness is to arrive at some acute sense of what political, social, and human values are entailed in the reading, production, and transmission of every text. To stand between culture and system is therefore to stand *close to*—closeness itself having a particular value for me—a concrete reality about which political, moral, and social judgments have to be made and, if not only made, then exposed and demystified.[24]

Nonetheless, before a close reading of Atwood's novels, it seems necessary to explain and justify both the very choice of the motifs analysed, and the selection of the literary material.

---

[19] Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 3.
[20] Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 153.
[21] Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 2nd edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 19.
[22] Rigney, *Women Writers*, 8.
[23] Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 19.
[24] Said, *The World*, 26.

Science, Women and Religion

Firstly, science, with which Atwood is undeniably familiar, has been a vital part of her life from early childhood: "her late father, Carl, was a zoologist. A man she describes warmly as 'very remarkable,' he came from the backwoods of Nova Scotia, put himself through school by correspondence course and went on to gain a PhD in entomology. Eventually he became a professor in Toronto."[25] However, the notion of science also derives from Atwood's certified preoccupation with ecology, a bundle of ideas that could be summarised as "her environmental interests and increasingly urgent warnings about global warming, pollution and, the risks of biotechnology."[26] In a way, science seems a reversal of nature, both its extension and violation, since when put together, these two notions can be viewed as binary opposites of a particular power relation: one representing oppression and domination (science), versus the other, dominated and oppressed (nature). In Atwood's works this opposition should not be viewed in such simple terms. Quite the contrary, to her science is just a tool people use to describe and understand the world. Therefore, science cannot exist without human beings, who either enhance it with, or deprive it of meaning. It is this very process that seems of most importance to Atwood. In our contemporary world, driven by countless scientific inventions, she does not hesitate to ask whether it is mainly science through which humanity can acquire knowledge. Or, whether science actually distances us from what is really important. Consequently, she acts as Said's intellectual, unafraid to enquire about inconvenient issues that appear central to all of us, here and now. The Palestinian critic notes: "literature is produced in time and in society by human beings, who are themselves agents of, as well as somewhat independent actors within, their actual history."[27] As a writer and intellectual, Atwood remains independent. That is exactly why people and their contemporary attitude to both science and its opposite, the natural environment, constitute Atwood's real interest. She states:

> Mankind made a Faustian bargain as soon as he invented the first technologies, including the bow and arrow. Our technological system is the mill that grinds out everything you wish to order up, but no one knows how to turn it off. The end result of a totally efficient technological

[25] Peter Kemp, "Visions of the Future's Darkness," review of *Oryx and Crake*, by Margaret Atwood, *The Sunday Times*, April 20, 2003, accessed November 6, 2010, http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/article227358.ece.
[26] Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 6.
[27] Said, *The World*, 152.

> exploitation of Nature would be a lifeless desert, having been devoured by the mills of production, and the resulting debt to nature would be infinite.[28]

Here one can see a deeply ethical way of Atwood perceiving and rewriting the contemporary world, a way that gathers in itself all her recurring interests (e.g. regarding feminism, since in her view it has become especially visible in the last few years, it is no use talking only about gender power relations anymore). What is required instead is a close analysis of such implications, both contextual and political, in relation to human beings and the natural environment surrounding them. Hence, it is the concept of worldliness that makes science in the contemporary world the object of cultural investigation, open to numerous and fast altering contexts. It also shows that Atwood's concerns are wide, and science—with its realisations ranging from genetic engineering to virtual reality—has been identified by her as one of the greatest new menaces, becoming an important theme of hers.

Then there is the motif of women. When it comes to Atwood, the feminist context, which constitutes a broader perspective of this very motif, appears most important. Rigney states: "Atwood has grown up with the contemporary women's movement."[29] This fact is crucial, for it emphasises the passing of time together with the alteration of subject-matter. Born in 1939, Atwood's first years of adulthood, as well as the beginning of her writing, fall in the 1960s, i.e. the flourishing of second-wave feminism, which—inspired mainly by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949, 1953), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969)—"center[ed] on the subjects of gender, femininity, and sexuality."[30] It was during this period that the fundamental questions about female identity appeared. In her attempts to answer them, Simone de Beauvoir noted:

> Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. And she is simply what man decrees. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.[31]

---

[28] Margaret Atwood, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 201–2.
[29] Rigney, *Women Writers*, 12.
[30] Tolan, *Margaret Atwood*, 2.
[31] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1986), 16.

Consequently, patriarchy was identified as the kind of cultural theory and practice that—using all the available instruments that men have in their privileged and superior position—is responsible for women's inferior status. Kate Millet used the phrase "sexual politics" to describe this situation: "the term 'politics' shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another."[32] At the same time, in the famous 1969 essay "The Personal Is Political," Carol Hanisch noted the fact that since patriarchy starts at home, in the most private sphere of a woman's life, then this sphere should be made public: "personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution."[33] Her postulation for women was to act together to fight the degrading and unjust legacy of patriarchal culture. Hence, unlike first-wave feminists, who mainly concentrated on emancipation issues, second-wave feminists emphasised and appreciated the difference between men and women, making it both the central weapon against the male-dominated system, as well as the tool to stress their unique identity. Additionally, as Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore comment: "a second current of feminist literary criticism grew up alongside and in response to the analysis of patriarchal culture. This was concerned with women's writing, and specially with writing as a mode of resistance."[34] As a result, the importance of women's writing was underlined because it not only demonstrates the shift from passivity to activity, but also plays a significant role in persuading women to actively disagree with the notion of their inferiority.

However, Atwood has never been a blind enthusiast of all the ideas of second-wave feminism. As Howells comments: "Atwood has always been seen as a feminist icon, albeit a resistant and at times an inconvenient one," and, as a sign of which, "her fiction is a combination of engagement, analysis and critique of the changing fashions within feminism."[35] This corresponds with Fiona Tolan's feminist reading of Atwood's novels. Tolan, nevertheless, admits:

---

[32] Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1971), 23.
[33] Carol Hanisch, "The Personal Is Political," accessed December 20, 2014, http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html.
[34] Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, "Introduction: The Story So Far," in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, edited by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan Press. 1997), 6.
[35] Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 15, 17.

> A theory such as feminism, which is simultaneously political, popular, and academic, immediately negotiates sites of interaction with a myriad of alternative discourses. Consequently, the feminism to be read in Atwood's novels is not the feminism that is to be discovered in feminist textbooks. Therefore, it is to be assumed that the novelist has generated a new and original contribution to feminist discourse. Her work is never presumed to be a sole influence or a direct precipitant of feminist development, but it is identified as a salient and intelligent component of a general cultural discourse.[36]

In other words, feminism alone seems not enough for Atwood, as for her "art is a moral issue, and it is the responsibility of the writer/artist not only to describe the world, but also to criticise it, to bear witness to its failures, and, finally, to prescribe corrective measures—perhaps even to redeem."[37] However, such a worldly position does not contradict the feminist attitude, because "for the feminist reader there is no innocent or neutral approach to literature: all interpretation is political. To interpret a work is always to address, whether explicitly or implicitly, certain kinds of issues about what it says."[38] It is also true, yet, that an extended openness to the issues of the external world is more characteristic of post-feminism, which started emerging from second-wave feminism in the 1980s. Consequently, the ideas of third-wave feminism seem to appeal to Atwood's cross-cultural interest to a greater extent. No wonder, since the contemporary version of feminism, or "feminisms," as Howells proposes,[39] more subtly points at both the politics of power and cultural analysis, with its postcolonial-inspired shift towards formerly marginalised groups of women (black, lesbian, and third world, etc.). Belsey and Moore note: "Drawing on the [African-American women's] experience of being rendered doubly invisible within American culture, a generation of black women activists, autobiographers, critics and novelists aimed to distinguish the difference of their history and art."[40] At the same time, post-feminism is much broader than just emphasising the postcolonial experience. Donna Haraway notes:

> It has become difficult to name one's feminism by a single adjective. With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in "essential" unity.

---

[36] Tolan, *Margaret Atwood*, 3–4.
[37] Rigney, *Women*, 1.
[38] Belsey and Moore, "Introduction," 1.
[39] Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 17.
[40] Belsey and Moore, "Introduction," 12.

> There is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.[41]

Again, the questions of (not only female) identity, this time linked to the issue of gender, appear most crucial. Judith Butler states: "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalises nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without these acts, there would be no gender at all."[42] Complicated and diverse, what tends to be called post-feminism can be described as the immersion of women in the world of culture, with all its social, sexual and power relations characteristic of the very contemporariness of the last thirty years. Such a broad definition, with the stress on the worldliness of women, appears to match Atwood's understanding of post-feminisms. She admits: "I am interested in many forms of interaction possible among women—just as I am in those between women and men. I'm interested in male–male interaction."[43] It is, then, exactly what seems of greatest importance to my analysis: the overall cultural conditioning of women in the times of post-feminism(s); hence, Atwood's motif of women does not restrict itself only to this discourse's analysing practices, but encompasses—in a very Saidian manner—women in the world, with all the cultural contexts of this motif.

Concerning religion, Atwood offers critical insight into the various power relations that seem to be inscribed in every system of attitudes, beliefs and practices of that kind. A declared agnostic, Atwood finds religion interesting mainly in cultural and historical terms. She states: "I can't say the established religions have a terribly good track record. Most of them have quite a history of doing people in—not to mention their attitude towards women."[44] However, entering the discourse on religion, she mainly has in mind Christianity, especially in its North-American context. Here, the notion of her Canadian nationalism returns, since Atwood has frequently defined it through opposition to the dominant

---

[41] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 1999), 319.
[42] Judith Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 1999), 381.
[43] Geoff Hancock, ed., *Canadian Writers at Work: Interviews with Geoff Hancock* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 262–63.
[44] Hancock, *Canadian*, 285.

American identity. In the case of religion, the writer proposes a sober critique of both the Puritans and their seventeenth-century idea of theocracy, which "was totalitarian and hierarchical in nature," and the contemporary legacy of such a standpoint.[45] In other words, she traces the deeply-rooted totalitarian elements of religions (and especially Puritanism), and she does so by uncovering its violently dominant attitude, e.g. towards women, where male hegemony demonstrates itself in the most visible form, at least according to Atwood. She seems to be aware of Millett's idea that "religious and literary myth all attests to the politically expedient character of patriarchal convictions about women."[46] Nevertheless, the writer's perception of religion as ideology is far from being one-dimensional, as she does not restrict herself to only criticizing its mechanisms. Quite the contrary, as "a prominent figure in cultural politics," she realises the vast positive resources that could be gained from religion.[47] These include both ideological matters—her tone when writing about religion is very often not only harshly critical but also ironically benevolent—and her fascination with religious artefacts, e.g. the Bible and its value to the world's culture, which should not be overestimated. The inspiration—both thematic and generic—that she gains from this canonical text of Western civilization is impossible to overlook. She states: "What is interesting to me about the whole complex [of religious beliefs and practices] is that mythology precedes religion. If we can talk about mythology instead of religion, then we'll be probably on a firmer ground."[48] This, on the other hand, can be associated with Atwood's postmodern poetics, which Linda Hutcheon defines as her "use and abuse of traditional (male) literary conventions."[49] It also reveals that although this book is focused on content rather than form, the latter is also of utmost importance.

Dystopian Speculative Fiction

Atwood is conscious of the themes and style she uses: "her peculiar astringent blending of these two elements [i.e. form and contents] links her separate works, which display such technical and intellectual versatility

[45] Belsey and Moore, "Introduction," 12.
[46] Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 46.
[47] Howells, Margaret Atwood, 4.
[48] Branko Gorjup, "Interview with Margaret Atwood," in *Margaret Atwood: Essays on her Works* (Toronto: Guernica, 2008), 242.
[49] Hutcheon, *The Canadian*, 138.

that they often seem unrelated."[50] However, as Howells explains, there is a kind of affinity in all Atwood's novels:

> Atwood is an extremely versatile writer, and in every novel she takes up the conventions of a different narrative form—Gothic romance, fairy tale, spy thriller, science fiction of historical novel—working within those conventions and reshaping them. Her writing insistently challenges the limits of traditional genres, yet this experimentalism is balanced against a strong continuity of interests, which are both aesthetic and social.[51]

Definitely, one of Atwood's most powerful means of expressing worldly interests—because it seems that, after all, substance always comes before form in her prose—is the genre of dystopian or speculative fiction, as both terms are adequate. Thus, they become the key terms of this monograph and determine my choice of her literary material to be analysed. However, these genres are similar and dissimilar at the same time, to various degrees representing the broader category of science fiction. All these interesting dependencies and intersections need to be specified.

Starting from speculative fiction, it must be emphasized that for many critics the term is more or less synonymous with science-fiction (also referred to as SF), representing a variant on the broader genre. P. L. Thomas, who uses both these terms interchangeably, notes: "SF and speculative fiction are genres that move readers to imagine alternative ways of being alive."[52] What is more, according to Michael Svec and Mike Winiski, who prefer the term speculative SF genre, its most fundamental features are:

1. Deep description of the science content or technologies that were plausible or accurate to the time period.
2. The novum: a plausible innovation as a key element in the speculation.
3. Big Picture: exploration of the impact on society and humanity.
4. Nature of Science: science and technology as human endeavours.[53]

---

[50] John Moss, *A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*, 2nd edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1987), 1.
[51] Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 5–6.
[52] P. L. Thomas, "Challenging Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction," in *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres*, edited by P. L. Thomas (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013), 4.
[53] Michael Svec and Mike Winiski, "Confronting the Science and the Fiction," in *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres*, edited by P. L. Thomas (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013), 38.

It can be stated, then, that speculative fiction represents an alternative, futuristic vision of the contemporary world in which science and technology appear of utmost importance to the picture of society they shape. Moreover, even though fictional science always exceeds the actual possibilities of the state of the art, the vision it proposes carries in itself a huge amount of probability. Hence, speculative fiction tends to drift towards the genre of utopia/dystopia, because it envisions a reality that is always alternative to ours, either more positive, or more negative. Consequently, Erika Gottlieb proposes the term "speculative dystopian fiction" as the most appropriate, at the same time emphasising the satirical value of the genre.[54] This is the label I use in the context of Atwood's novels, either as the combination of these two words, or both dystopia and speculative fiction appearing as separate but interchangeable terms. To explain this generic combination, Gottlieb asks:

> What are the most salient characteristics of dystopian fiction if we concentrate on such well-known representatives of this speculative genre as Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*? All these works are political satires, projections of the fears that their writers' own society in the West could be moving towards a type of totalitarian dictatorship already experienced as historical reality in the USSR and in Eastern and Central Europe.[55]

This point of view, showing some affinity between the dystopian genre and SF, corresponds with Chris Ferns' opinion when the critic calls utopia/dystopia "a subgenre of science fiction."[56] M. Keith Booker notes both similarities and differences between these two genres. He states: "There is clearly a great deal of overlap between dystopian fiction and science fiction, and many texts belong to both categories. But in general, dystopian fiction differs from science fiction in the specificity of its attention to social and political critique."[57] It seems, then, that speculative/dystopian fiction is the ground on which the genres of science-fiction and utopia/dystopia meet, for in this genre futuristic visions are always determined by a satirical and critical approach to contemporary

---

[54] Erika Gottlieb, Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 34.
[55] Gottlieb, *Dystopian*, 7.
[56] Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Form, Gender in Utopian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 10.
[57] M. Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 4.

reality. What is more, it demonstrates that they are so inseparably linked to each other that it is impossible to determine definite dividing lines. As Atwood states: "When it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, the things slip back and forth across them with insouciance."[58] As a result, both the political and satirical dimension of speculative dystopias, as well as technocratic and futuristic elements present in speculative SF, match Atwood's understanding of the broad genre in an apt way.

Unlike critics who do not seem to notice the difference between dystopian fiction and science-fiction, Atwood disagrees with such a categorisation. Commenting on *The Handmaid's Tale*, she strongly opposes identifying her book as science-fiction: "I define science fiction as fiction in which things happen that are not possible today—that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel, time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or that certain various technologies we have not yet developed."[59] She even labels her own version of dystopian fiction with the neologism *ustopia*: "*Ustopia* is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other."[60] By speculative fiction, she understands quite a different type of prose than most SF critics, i.e. fiction founded on more solid facts: "We've done it, or we're doing it, or we could start doing it tomorrow. Nothing inconceivable takes place, and the projected trends on which my future society is based are already in motion."[61] This disagreement in labelling her speculative novels SF, provoked by Ursula Le Guin's reviews of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, sucked Atwood into a public dispute over these terms. She explains her point:

> I found that what [Le Guin] means by "science fiction" is speculative fiction about things that really could happen, whereas things that really could not happen she classifies under "fantasy." In short, what Le Guin means "science fiction" is what I mean "speculative fiction," and what she means by "fantasy" would include some of what I mean by "science fiction."[62]

---

[58] Margaret Atwood, "Introduction," in *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Random House Inc., 2011), 7.
[59] Margaret Atwood, "Writing Utopia," in *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose 1983–2005* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005), 92.
[60] Margaret Atwood, "Dire Cartographies: the Roads to Ustopia," in *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Random House Inc., 2011), 66.
[61] Atwood, "Dire Cartographies," 92.
[62] Atwood, "Introduction," 6–7.

As Svec and Winiski summarise the dispute: "Margaret Atwood saw SF as descending from H.G. Well's *War of the Worlds* with speculative fiction tracing its origins to Jules Verne."[63] What is more, this generic category should not be limited to the future only, and its definition could be as follows: "The speculative mixing of past and present typifies speculative fiction, which most often generates other worlds as comment upon our own. Such fiction raises questions not only about what might happen, but also about what is happening."[64] In other words, what interests Atwood is describing the present, and in the vehicle of speculative dystopian fiction she seems to have found her own method to take part in the discourses of the contemporariness. As she confessed after the publication of *Alias Grace* (the first historical novel of hers in which she employed a similar technique), in the reference to the past:

> The fictional world so lovingly delineated by the writer may bear a more obvious or a less obvious relation to the world we actually live in, but bearing no relation to it at all is not an option. We have to write out of who and where we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it as we may. As Robertson Davies has remarked, "we all belong to our own time, and there is nothing whatever that we can do to escape from it. Whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set in a past age." We can't help but be modern, just as the Victorian writers—whenever they set their books—couldn't help but be Victorian. Like all beings alive on Middle Earth, we're trapped by time and circumstance.[65]

Characterising her writing, this assertive declaration distinctly corresponds with Said's notion of worldliness, with all its cultural references to our here and now, to which Atwood's prose seems to be consciously open.

***

The main body of this book consists of four chapters, each devoted to Atwood's first dystopian speculative novels analysed in chronological order. They are: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Oryx and Crake* (2003),

---

[63] Svec and Winiski, "Confronting," 38.

[64] Madonne Miner, "Trust Me: Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale,"* edited by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), 23.

[65] Margaret Atwood, "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction," in *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose 1983-2005* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005), 158–59.

The Year of the Flood (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). Each of these chapters is divided into three subsections, in which I approach the given novel from the perspective outlined in a detailed way in this chapter, i.e. the issues connected to science, women and religion. However, these three problematic areas should be treated as starting points for the discussion of various aspects of Atwood's novels directly and indirectly associated with them. In other words, these three interpretative platforms are pretexts rather than a means in themselves. Their function is also to make my argument intelligible and palatable. What is more, it is my deliberate decision to exclude from the corpus of this monograph Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), which also carries some characteristics of the genre. I have taken this decision for a number of reasons, two of which are of decisive importance. Firstly, the last novel enjoys a relatively poorer critical reception, especially in comparison to the four first ones' general acclaim. Secondly, the dystopia envisioned in *The Heart Goes Last* drifts towards a parody of the genre, focusing on hilarious scenes and situations rather than investigating serious moral problems. No matter if this is done by the writer willingly or not, the relatively lesser seriousness of the novel's message makes it stand apart from the Atwoodian canon of dystopian fiction.

The title of my book is an obvious reference to one of Atwood's most famous poems, "Eating Fire," originally taken from the 1974 volume *You Are Happy*. In the first of its five sections we read:

> Eating fire
>
> is your ambition:
> to swallow the flame down
> take it into your mouth
> and shoot it forth, a shout or an incandescent
> tongue, a word
> exploding from you in gold, crimson,
> unrolling in a brilliant scroll
>
> To be lit up from within
> vein by vein
>
> To be the sun.[66]

In my opinion, this is precisely what Atwood urges us to do in her prose, and especially in her dystopian speculative novels: to read carefully,

[66] Margaret Atwood, *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965–1995* (London: Virago Press, 1998), 181.

remembering that each word has its value, its power, and to let this word transform us. It is the writer's responsibility and her moral duty to use words in this way. In *Negotiating with the Dead*, a non-fiction book with the revealing subtitle, *A Writer on Writing*, she refers to this problem of ethics in literature:

> This may be overdoing it a bit, especially in the age of the atom bomb, the Internet, and the rapid disappearance of other species from this earth. But still, let us suppose that the words the writer writes do not exist in some walled garden called "literature," but actually get out there into the world, and have effects and consequences. Don't we then have to begin talking about ethics and responsibilities?[67]

She leaves that question about the necessity of worldliness in literature open because the answer appears obvious. Yet, she clearly articulates some kind of solution, returning at the same time to the already-mentioned concept of I-witnessing: "Is there a self-identity for the writer that combines responsibility with artistic integrity? If there is, what might it be? Ask the age we live in, and it might reply—the witness. And, if possible, the eyewitness."[68] She concludes this train of thought in the following way: "The eye is cold because it is clear, and it is clear because its owner must look: he must look at everything. Then she must record."[69]

[67] Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (London: Virago Press, 2003), 86–87.
[68] Atwood, *Negotiating*, 104.
[69] Atwood, *Negotiating*, 108.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HANDMAID'S TALE, OR THE REPUBLIC OF MEN

In their monstrous night
thick with possible claws
where danger is not knowing,

you are the hugest monster.

(Margaret Atwood, "Cyclopes," *Eating Fire*, 92)

***

Fists have many forms;
a fist knows what it can do

without the nuisance of speaking:
it grabs and smashes.

From those inside or under
words gush like toothpaste.

Language, the fist
proclaims by squeezing
is for the weak only.

(Margaret Atwood, "We Hear Nothing," *Eating Fire*, 118)

***

This is your trick or miracle,
to be consumed and rise
intact, over and over, even for myths there is
a limit, the limit when you accomplish
failure and return
from the fire minus your skin.

(Atwood, "Eating Fire," *Eating Fire*, 182)

Environmental Degradation and its Impact on Society

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is not a book preoccupied with scientific and environmental issues, echoes and shadows of these problems are of the highest importance in reference to social and sexual discrimination. Atwood fully understands "the duality of modern methods of technology and the regressive acts of a pre-civilized, prehistoric mentality," which—according to Erika Gottlieb—constitutes one of the most important features of dystopian writing.[1] Science, then, is used in *The Handmaid's Tale* as a kind of a backdrop, or a point of reference, for the more visible and stigmatised issues of women's discrimination and theocratic domination. Emphasising such an approach, Atwood describes her reasons for writing the novel in the following way:

> To make my future society, I proposed something a little more complex [than the twentieth-Century dictatorships]. Bad economic times, yes, but also a period of widespread environmental catastrophe, which has several results: a higher infertility and sterility rate due to chemical and radiation damage (this, by the way, is happening already) and a higher birth-defect rate, which is also happening.[2]

The scientific issues constitute the background without which the literary representations of femininity vs. theocracy would not be so convincing and alarming. Therefore, although not so explicit—and even almost unnoticeable at first—science turns out to be one of the dominant elements of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and as such requires a closer analytic investigation.

Atwood's first effort in the genre of dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is the story of Offred, a handmaid who lives in the near-future state of Gilead. Situated in the north-eastern part of the United States, the republic's name carries a number of biblical connotations, as it appears in the Holy Book in reference to both persons and geographical names. For the first time, it is mentioned in the Book of Genesis as a mountainous region east of the Jordan River, directly connected with the story of Jacob. Gilead becomes central to the novel and its critique of extreme patriarchy (the notion discussed in the Religion chapter), since "the Old Testament mentions Gilead as a backdrop for quite a few important events from

---

[1] Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East*, 37–38.

[2] Margaret Atwood, "Writing Utopia," in *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose 1983–2005* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005), 98.