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CRITICAL APPROACHES

THEMES

UTOPIAS AND DYSTOPIAS

The tradition of utopian fiction in our Western culture goes back to the Ancient Greeks with Plato's Republic, written about 350BC. Writers have always invented imaginary good societies (utopias) and imaginary bad societies (anti-utopias or **dystopias**) in order to comment on distinctive features and trends of their own societies. Utopias and anti-utopias are not merely fantasy worlds, but, as Krishan Kumar describes them in his book *Utopianism* (1991), they are imaginary places 'and accordingly futile to seek out, that nevertheless exist tantalisingly (or frighteningly) on the edge of possibility, somewhere just beyond the boundary of the real' (p. 1). These fictions always have a kind of mirror relation to the writer's own world. They may offer models for the future, or more frequently they may make **satiric** attacks on present society and deliver strong warnings against the consequences of particular kinds of political and social behaviour.

Margaret Atwood said in a review of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), 'Utopias are products of the moral rather than the literary sense', and as political or social commentary they have a strongly didactic element. They need to be read with some knowledge of the context of their own time to enable the reader to see the particularities of the society in which they were produced. Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) is concerned with the possibilities for a better society that were being opened up by the discovery of the New World of America, whereas nearly 500 years later *The Handmaid's Tale* is warning against threats of environmental pollution, religious fundamentalism and state surveillance in that same New World which has become the United States of America.

Utopias and dystopias are evidently two sides of the same coin, and it is worth thinking about the **genre** or literary form to which they both belong. How do we define a genre at the present time? Today we think of genre not as a rigid classification system but

rather as a set of conventions or codes or 'family resemblances' (in plot or form or kind of language used) which structure the choices writers make, just as they structure our expectations as readers. These expectations are formed from all the other texts we have read, as we look for familiar signs which tell us whether to expect a detective novel or a romance, for example. **Postmodern** critics have encouraged us to see genres as social constructions, historically and ideologically responsive to the society to which they belong. Linda Hutcheon puts this position very clearly in *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988) when she emphasises how **postmodern** fiction, in which she includes *The Handmaid's Tale*, highlights specificities of location which challenge conventions that are presumed to be 'universal'. Those 'universals' can 'in fact be shown to embody the values of a very particular group of people—of a certain class, race, gender, and sexual orientation' (p. 108). Their narrative choices marginalise or neglect all other perspectives. This attitude of contestation challenges traditional systems of authority, which include literary genres as well as political systems and patriarchal structures of belief, and cultural codes. The critical emphasis is now on resistance to generic conventions, playing against them, by giving the narrative authority to people whose voices have been formerly silenced, eg. women, as Atwood does in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Atwood is still very aware of the power of generic conventions, which form the contract between writer and reader. In an interview shortly after the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* she commented:

You have to understand what the [literary] form is doing, how it works, before you say, 'Now we're going to make it different, we're going to do this thing which is unusual, we're going to turn it upside down, we're going to move it so it includes something which isn't supposed to be there, we're going to surprise the reader' (*Conversations*, p. 193).

She is thinking here of the dystopian genre and the crucial changes she has made to it with *The Handmaid's Tale*, for utopias and dystopias belong traditionally to a masculine genre, and she has feminised the dystopia by making her storyteller a woman. When in

CONTEXT

The Greek philosopher Plato (c.428/7–c.348/7bc) wrote a series of dialogues, one of which is *The Republic*. In it Socrates describes the ideal state, in which the perfect forms of beauty, goodness and truth are cultivated to the exclusion of their opposites.

CONTEXT

In classical genre theory, first spelled out by Aristotle, literary works were divided into three genres: lyric, epic and dramatic, but as new forms like the novel were invented, the concept of genre was widened to accommodate these new forms. Genre theory was always being revised and redefined according to different criteria.

World events

1933-45 7 million Jews exterminated under Nazi regime

1939-45 Second World War

1954 Acid rain first documented

1962 Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* prophesies devastation of our environment through pesticides and pollution

Author's life

1939 Margaret Atwood born, Ottawa

Early 1940s Lives in Rural Ontario where father is entomologist, and Quebec

1946 Settles in Toronto, where father becomes a university professor

1961 Graduates, and publishes first poems. Goes to Harvard to study American literature

Other literary works

1850 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

1915 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*

1921 Yevgeny Zamyatin, *My (We)*

1934 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

1949 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)*

1955 John Wyndham, *The Crystalids*

1964 Phyllis Gotlieb, *Sunburst*

World events

1967 Abortion legalised in Britain

1968 Pope Paul's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*: 'Every conjugal act (has) to be open to the transmission of life'
China legislates only one child per family

1970 Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church performs mass marriage ceremony of 790 couples. 2 million die in Biafran civil war

1971 Greenpeace founded to protest about nuclear testing in Alaska

1972 US Congress endorses Equal Rights Amendment

1973 Abortion legalised in USA

1974 International Federation for Family Life Promotion founded in USA (anti-abortion)

1975 War ends in Vietnam
Sterilisation of low-caste men in India

1975-9 1 million die in Cambodia under Khmer Rouge

Author's life

1966 Publishes *The Circle Game* (poems)

1967 Marries James Polk

1969 Publishes *The Edible Woman*

1970-8 Publishes five further books of poetry

1972 Publishes *Survival*, controversial study of Canadian literature; *Surfacing* (novel)

1973 Divorced; lives with partner Graeme Gibson, novelist

1976 Daughter Jess born. Publishes *Lady Oracle*

Other literary works

1971 Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*

1973 Wayland Drew, *The Wabeno Feast*

1974 Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

1975 Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*

1976 Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*