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We come apart: mother-child relationships in Margaret Atwood's dystopias

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We come apart: mother-child relationships in Margaret Atwood's dystopias

by

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The Handmaid's Tale (1985), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) by Margaret Atwood each depict a frightening, not-too-distant future replete with horrifying possibilities. These easily imaginable future worlds stand as warnings for modern readers because through them, Margaret Atwood skillfully exposes ways the present world is broken. The problems she illuminates include strict patriarchy, environmental destruction, unwise application of technology, and unquestioning adherence to religion.

I have chosen to look at another crack in the foundation of society exposed by Atwood: damaged relationships between mothers and their children. The problems experienced by mother and child characters in these works are certainly linked to other issues, but I aim to explore the possibility that damaged maternal bonds inevitably result in the breakdown of the larger society. I begin by referencing established critical views of motherhood and the consistent theme of motherhood that runs throughout Atwood's other novels. Then, I devote the majority of my efforts to examining each of the focus novels, concentrating on the ways mother-child relationships affect and are affected by the events they recount. By employing close reading strategies in conjunction with established critical theories of motherhood, I analyze each text. This methodology has helped me to decipher messages about feminism and motherhood that relate to the present world. Finding the roots of the problems in the fictional future worlds could offer solutions that will ultimately help prevent catastrophic consequences in the real one.

CRITICAL VIEWS OF MOTHERHOOD

Many literary critics, especially feminist critics, have incorporated mother-child relationships into their work. The questions I use to examine each of the three Atwood novels hinge upon how relations between mothers and children shape the world and to what extent external forces impact the ways mothers and children bond with one another. I use a variety of critical essays and books, including works by Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Sara Ruddick, and Adria Schwartz. Each of these writers offers distinct ideas about motherhood; theories from all of them can aid us in understanding the mother-child relationships in the Atwood novels I examine here.

Rich wrote in *Of Woman Born*, “we know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood” (11). When her work was published in 1976, Rich was a feminist pioneer- one of the first to explore the ways motherhood and feminism intersect. She makes a clear point to address possible conflicts in her foreword: “This book is not an attack on the family or on mothering, *except as defined and restricted under patriarchy*” (14). Reading Rich’s work in conjunction with Atwood’s sparks a question: can mothers extract themselves from patriarchal definitions? Understanding long held notions about sexual labor divisions and power provides a shared background against which mothers and other readers can examine their own experiences. Though Atwood’s mothers and children inhabit fictional worlds, they share a common cultural heritage with real-life twentieth- and twenty-first century mothers and children. Rich provides a thorough history of women’s work and questions the power structures that turn against women whether they are mothers or not.

In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, feminist psychoanalytical theorist Nancy Chodorow acknowledges that biology plays a significant role in motherhood. She sees that women in most societies expect and/or are expected not only to bear children, but also almost without exception to “take primary responsibility for infant care, spend more time with infants and children than do men, and sustain primary emotional ties with infants” (3). She notes, “women’s mothering is one of the few universal and enduring elements of the sexual division of labor” (3). Chodorow points out the difference between “mothering” a child and “fathering” one. She questions the notion of mothering as a task that should come naturally to all women. Biology only partially determines destiny in Chodorow’s work. The physical components of mothering (pregnancy and lactation) certainly influence the relationships women have with infants, but she finds those are not a necessary for maternal instinct or mother-child bonding (19-22). Women do the mothering (the primary parenting), she says, because they want to preserve the social order and because they have received cultural messages about “capacities for mothering and abilities to get gratification from it [that] are strongly internalized and psychologically enforced” (39). Women’s development into mothers springs from their experiences as children, their particular mothers, and socialization (39). She explains how changing social and economic conditions affect women’s mothering:

Women today are expected to be full-time mothers and to work in the paid labor force, are considered unmotherly if they demand day-care centers, greedy and unreasonable if they expect help from husbands, and lazy if they are single mothers who want to receive adequate welfare payments in order to be able to stay home for their children. (213)

Although this passage originally appeared in 1978, the sentiment echoes throughout Atwood's novels and is still heard today. Chodorow's subsequent work focuses on clarifying and expanding ideas about feminism and motherhood established in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, and she carefully explains that women should not be blamed for all the problems experienced by their children. She refutes the "fantasy of the perfect mother" with collaborator Susan Contratto. They decry "the sense that mothers are totally responsible for the outcomes of their mothering, even if their behavior in turn is shaped by a male-dominant society" (80). They also find that in many cases, acceptance of the "all-powerful mother" image leads to idealization of motherhood that real women cannot possibly achieve. The anxiety caused by unrealistic expectations appears in many of Atwood's novels. I can see this most obviously in Jimmy's mother in *Oryx and Crake*.

Sara Ruddick's definition of mothering in *Maternal Thinking* is "to take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and substantial part of one's working life" and she also contends that anyone who does "maternal work" is therefore mothering (17). These guidelines validate others besides biological mothers. Ruddick continues her line of reasoning by explaining that the primary job of a mother is to protect a child, and the next most important concern is to nurture the child. She recognizes the "considerable burden" (20) placed on mothers and claims:

Women as well as men may refuse to be aware of or respond to the demands of children; some women abuse or abandon creatures who are, in all cultures, dependent and vulnerable. All mothers sometimes turn away, refuse to listen, stop caring. Both maternal work and the thinking

that is provoked by it are decisively shaped by the possibility that any mother may refuse to see creatures as children or to respond to them as complicated, fragile, and needy. (22)

Whether conscious refusal to fit the traditional mold of motherhood makes an individual a “good mother” or a “bad mother” can certainly spark serious debate. Though certainly substantial, the powers mothers hold regarding how attentive they are to their children have their limitations also. Ruddick says, “maternal powerlessness is very real indeed” (35) in large part because of the external constraints placed upon them. The degree to which mothers are able to give their children attention varies greatly among Atwood’s characters, but often the lack of attention plays an important role in the children’s development. Ruddick also devotes considerable attention to the technological aspects of pregnancy, which figure prominently in all three Atwood novels analyzed here also.

Psychoanalytical and biological theories for women’s roles as mothers have historically persisted, but a long history of adoption and surrogacy also has some bearing. Adria Schwartz notes that technology has helped women overcome “constraints placed upon them by biology” (242). Alternative reproduction methods open the category of “mother” to a much larger field. These new technologies come at a cost, however. Ann Snitow asks, “To what extent is motherhood a powerful identity? To what extent is it a patriarchal construction that inevitably places mothers outside the realm of social, the changing, the active?” (qtd. in Schwartz 248). Schwartz also finds Judith Butler’s work on gender in tune with ideas about modern mothering. The definition of traditional mothering, like the definition of traditional womanhood, depends upon “the oppression of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (250). Until recently,

women could not escape many of the limitations imposed upon them unless they successfully deconstructed those categories. Schwartz promotes the new cultural definitions of motherhood that include non-biological mothers in the club. She finds that a woman's biological relation to her child no longer signifies mothering in and of itself (252). Similar ideas about positive non-biological mothers appear in Atwood's dystopian novels as well.

These theories, in conjunction with Atwood's novels, help to pave the way toward new understandings about motherhood. Through those understandings, future definitions of mothering may be free from limitations imposed by patriarchy, religion, gender constructs, or other notions about what or who is natural.

MOTHERING THEME IN OTHER ATWOOD WORKS

Examples of troubled mother-child relationships (or the notable absence of mothers) in many of Atwood's earlier novels denote a continuous theme throughout her work. Pregnancy figures as a major plot point in *The Edible Woman* (1969), though no children participate in the story. *Surfacing* (1972) features a fantasy subplot that involves the main character giving her child to the husband she divorces. Adrienne Rich examines *Surfacing* and finds that the main message of the novel shows that "the search for the father leads to reunion with the mother" and that the quest frees the narrator from patriarchy and changes her life profoundly (242). The main character in *Lady Oracle* (1976) was mistreated by her mother and that experience seems to have had a lasting negative effect on her life. She has nurturing and protective mother figures in her life, but they do not impact her life nearly as much as her one "bad

mother.” The resolution of the love triangle conflict in *Life Before Man* (1979) hinges on one of the women throwing away her contraceptives. She only succeeds in winning the sole attention of the man by giving up her job and devoting herself to the role of mother. *Cat’s Eye* (1988) relates the story of a woman looking back on her adolescence; her relationship with her mother left her feeling vulnerable and unprepared for reality. Although these books differ strikingly from the three later novels I have chosen to analyze, they help provide a background for understanding Atwood’s overall view of motherhood and the conflicts that arise in the dystopian works.

Other feminist critics have attempted to explain Atwood’s motivation for writing some of these works. Annette Kolodny notes the marked shift after *Life Before Man* when “Atwood turned away from her previous concentration on the power politics of intimate relations and looked, instead, at the abuse of power in the public arena” (97). Kolodny also hypothesizes that Atwood made this change out of a desire to effect change through her fiction-- using novels rather than nonfiction “to render the dread palpable” (97). Improving conditions for women is one of the clearest goals she hopes to achieve by changing her focus from individual relationships to global destruction.

In the introduction to *Brutal Choreographies*, a collection of essays on Atwood, editor J. Brooks Bouson claims, “Atwood’s narratives set out both to expose and fictively redress the wrongs done to women. One of the targets for fictive punishment in Atwood’s art is the bad mother, who acts as a guardian and enforcer of the patriarchal codes that confine and injure women”; these characters become the stock character Bouson calls “the bad unempathic mother” (11).

Atwood's own experiences as a daughter and a mother can provide insight into her perspectives as well. In her presumably autobiographical piece, "Significant Moments in the Life of my Mother" (1983), the narrator recounts stories about both her mother's childhood and her own. These stories imply "collusion" (27) between mother and daughter that showcases the closeness between Atwood and her own mother. It stands to reason that a nurturing, supportive mother/daughter bond would be viewed as a positive influence, thus contrasting sharply with the negative relationships that are often depicted in Atwood's fiction. The stories she relates in "Significant Moments" depict her mother as a gifted storyteller. If that is the case, Atwood certainly inherited some of her talents. In contrast to her mother's private storytelling, Margaret Atwood's talents led her to a very public writing career. Remarking on Margaret Atwood's storytelling abilities, interviewer Linda Richards states, "Atwood's voice was strong, clear and different. She had invented herself not only as a writer, but as a writer that wanted to tell her stories in her own way." The subjects of her mother's stories, once relegated to the feminine spaces of private homes, find an outlet in the much more public work of her daughter. These topics, including "romantic betrayals, unwanted pregnancies, illnesses of various horrible kinds, marital infidelities, mental breakdowns, tragic suicides, unpleasant lingering deaths," ("Significant" 32) were arguably internalized by Atwood, for these same experiences occur throughout her work.

Regarding her own experiences as a mother, Atwood is notoriously private. Her daughter Jess was born 1976, "after she had established herself as a writer" (Rule 26). It stands to reason that Atwood's attitudes about mothering were likely shaped by some of the same ideas Chodorow presented in her works. Though many interviews with

Atwood delve into her writing process and her political beliefs, there are few mentions of her own experiences as a mother. This could result from her early career as a writer, when interview questions reportedly centered on her relationship with her husband. Those questions understandably annoyed Atwood; as one of a few recognized women writing seriously in the early 1970's, reporters often asked her, "When is Graeme leaving you?" (Rule 27). Jane Rule lauds Margaret Atwood, along with Marian Engel, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Carol Shields, and Audrey Thomas for providing literary models for young mothers who also want to write.

The complexity of mother-child relationships appears in conjunction with many other threads. Atwood does not comment specifically on how her relationship with her mother affects her as an adult, though late in the "Significant Moments" piece, the narrator explains how communication with her mother suffered once she (again, presumably Margaret Atwood) embarked upon telling the difficult stories: "I had become a visitant from outer space, a time-traveller come back from the future, bearing news of a great disaster" (38). This quote seems especially relevant to the points Atwood makes in the dystopian works *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*. Among the messages contained in these works are warnings to the mothers of today; Atwood attempts to ward off the events the novels contain by bringing attention to many problems already in existence. One of those problems is damaged relationships between mothers and their children.

The motivation for writing these recent novels has taken Atwood to a new level—that of oracle, prophet, or town crier. She never claims to be the first to recognize the problems that she depicts, but she certainly brings a great deal of attention to them.

Conjuring Virginia Woolf in a 2000 interview with *January* magazine, Atwood says, "Writing a novel is like walking through a dark room with a lamp and the light from the lamp illuminates all of the things that were always there already" (Richards). Collette Tennant agrees with my observation and states in the preface to *Reading the Gothic in Margaret Atwood* (2003): Atwood's dystopian fiction is "issuing a warning, like Cassandra and all those other silenced and ignored women in fiction and mythology" (i). Atwood herself offered her motives in an interview with Ben East for *The National* in March 2011: "People ask if they're cautionary tales," Atwood surmises. "And, yes, they are. Any dystopia is a cautionary tale. But I don't relish the fact that they've become truer as I've got older. You don't write books like these if you actually want them to become true."

Illuminating problems is an important first step toward solving them. In another interview, Atwood describes and acknowledges the impossibility of a perfect world: "one in which no one ever dies, everybody is happy all the time, nobody ever gets sick, everything always goes well. We can't hope for that. What we can hope for is human cooperation" (Dodson). Her goals, then, seem achievable. In each of the three novels I examine, forgiveness and cooperation play an important role in the protagonists' survival. The earliest example of these novels is *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Atwood depicts the problems and intimates possible solutions in a totalitarian patriarchal society.

CHAPTER II. *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Originally published in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in the former United States around the year 2045. Through this frame, a woman recounts the events of roughly one year in her life. She also provides details through flashbacks about the new society and how the world has changed drastically in a relatively short time. The society, called the Republic of Gilead, is controlled by an elite group of men who find Biblical justification for nearly all of their strict rules. Women may not read or write, nor act in ways other than serving men. This holds true for all classes of women: the Wives, the Marthas, the Aunts, and the Handmaids. The men of Gilead operate very much like men who feel threatened by any change to the historical patriarchal tradition. Adrienne Rich describes those men's reactions in *Of Woman Born*: "Patriarchy would seem to require, then, not only that women shall assume the major burden of pain and self-denial for the furtherance of the species, but that a majority of that species—women—shall remain essentially unquestioning and unenlightened" (43). Keeping women in powerless positions is essential to the men in Gilead. Without that structure in place, their society would collapse.

Fertility further subdivides women into castes in Gilead. An unspecified epidemic has left most men and women infertile. "Chemicals, rays, and radiation" (142-3) appear responsible for the sharp decline in healthy births. Sterile women are most fortunate if they are married to powerful men; otherwise, their best hope is for a servant's position like a teacher (the Aunts) or a housekeeper or cook (the Marthas). Women who do not qualify for either of those roles due to their economic status or perceived ungodliness hold no value and end up in the Colonies, a vast chaotic wasteland. They might marry

and live as low-class “Econowives” there, but they remain powerless. Others end up even lower on the scale; they are branded “Unwomen” and banished from all societies. The small minority of women who can still bear children and have not violated any of the strict rules of the ruling party are employed as Handmaids. Their reproductive ability gives them value, but their power is severely limited. Their main duty is to have sex with the Commanders to whom they are assigned. If they successfully bear children, they may retain their positions. If they do not produce a healthy child in two years’ time, their fates are the same as the other infertile women. Those who do have healthy children hand them over to the Commander and his wife after a brief interlude of breastfeeding. They may then earn the privilege of not ever being sent away to the Colonies. This hope for security provides an incentive, but the Handmaids have no further relationships with the children. Rather than begin the active work of mothering, they immediately move on to another household and hope to become pregnant again. This removes the nearly universally accepted belief that mothers need to stay with their babies. In *The Reproduction of Mothering* Nancy Chodorow identifies “being the person who socializes and nurtures” children as intrinsically connected to the definition of motherhood (11). Ruddick concurs in *Maternal Thinking* and states that one of a child’s primary demands of its mother is “to nurture its emotional and intellectual growth” (19). Part of Gilead’s horror stems from taking that nurturing role away from the children’s mothers.

Offred, the main character, tells her tale through a series of present-tense accounts and past-tense flashbacks. Through her eyes, readers learn about Offred’s experiences as a daughter and a mother. Her tale also reveals many features of the

new regime. In this world, an educated woman like herself must resort to complete submission as a Handmaid in order to survive. Her name is only given as Offred, a patronymic word that denotes her as the property of a man named Fred. Offred alludes to the events that led up to her current situation and provides a detailed description of her life. Readers learn much about her experiences and about her society. It is interesting to note that though reading and writing are prohibited, Offred has managed to tell her story orally. This connects to the taboo subjects women discuss in private homes in "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother."

Offred's most immediate concern revolves around her purpose as a Handmaid. Her identity relies upon her potential to become a mother, but not in the traditionally defined sense. She has been assigned to a role by the Gilead regime which "effectively robs women of their individual identities and transforms them into replaceable objects in the phallogocentric economy" (Bouson 136). In exchange for food, shelter, and relative safety, she must submit to frequent medical examinations and sex with her Commander when doctors confirm she is ovulating. She, like any other Handmaid, retains some power through her viable body, but that power is severely limited. Offred has no social life outside of the Commander's house, and within it, she has no allies. Any camaraderie she may have enjoyed during her time at the Red Center in preparation for her assignment dissolved when she moved to the Commander's home. Though Handmaids share a common fate, they have few opportunities to commiserate with one another. They are valued only when they participate in the biological acts of conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing. They seem like lonely machines-incubators who are expected to remain out of sight unless called upon to serve.

Bouson notes that Handmaids like Offred are “treated as subordinate other—as body without mind” (142). Behaving as though Handmaids are less than human frees those in power to treat them horribly.

Their isolation, coupled with their limited maternal roles, means that Handmaids lose the solidarity that traditionally results when women share their experiences with other mothers. Offred notes they are not allowed to “fraternize” with any other women of any social station and points out the gendered peculiarity of that word. She remembers her husband pointing out the lack of a feminine counterpart to it: there is no such word as “sororize” to describe informal friendship between women. This memory appears on page 15, and underscores the rest of the novel. Not only do Handmaids experience isolation from a husband or other romantic partner, but they must also live without friends. The men in charge have dehumanized them until they do not so much desire friendship as a return to “a self that existed independently of the uterus they have become” (Schwartz 247). Their private suffering comprises a large part of the tragedy depicted in the novel. It clearly results from the abuses they experience at the hands of the men and effectively denotes the society as dystopian.

A few of the Handmaids find ways to communicate their shared desire to escape. Offred finds her shopping partner has connections to an underground resistance group, and they form a trusting partnership on their daily walks. Their situation seems like an exception, because most Handmaids focus so intently on acting the part of dutiful believer in order to survive. Household rules silence them and keep them isolated from one another for the most part. The shopping trips are one of the few times the

Handmaids may gather in public. These occasions offer opportunities to share important news, as evidenced when an obviously pregnant Handmaid appears:

There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; despite ourselves we turn our heads, blatantly, to see better; our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved... 'Showoff' a voice hisses, and this is true. A woman that pregnant doesn't have to go out, doesn't have to go shopping... she could stay at her house. (35)

From this vantage point, the distinction between the past and the present time stands out vividly. The other Handmaids simultaneously rejoice in knowing that one of their ranks has successfully conceived and disparage her for going out when she has no obligation to do so. They see her as an arrogant braggart, conspicuously displaying her belly as a mark of prestige. Adrienne Rich might explain this woman's attitude is her only compensation for the powerlessness she experiences elsewhere in her life (67).

Ominously, the very means this woman has achieved for survival is also a liability to her. Offred states "now that she's the carrier of life, she is closer to death, and needs special security" (35). The dangers that threaten her include not only the physical risks every pregnancy brings, but also the possibility of murder by a jealous wife or Handmaid- "all children are wanted now, but not by everyone" (35). Here Atwood hints at the complexity of the abortion debate, even when taken out of contemporary context. Readers can clearly infer that worldwide fertility declines do not justify the treatment Handmaids experience, nor do doctors who once performed abortions deserve to be

killed (43-4). The stark contrast between modern times and the setting of the novel appears here because “no woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky as to conceive” (45). “Lucky” seems far from accurate as an adjective for the Handmaids. The temporary relief they may feel during their pregnancies would be tempered with fear of retaliation by one of those jealous women, and they would be highly aware that their babies would not stay with them long. More true in Gilead even than in the modern world, “with an infant’s first breath, a child is beginning to walk away” (*Maternal Thinking* 210). Handmaids would likely never see their children crawl, let alone walk away.

Social class divides the women, but the Handmaids feel sympathetic toward those women with lower status. Unlike the way Wives and other servants treat them, the Handmaids react sympathetically when they encounter Econowives and Unwomen. Offred shares an account of a day when she and her shopping partner witness a group of three Econowives with a miscarried fetus in a jar. When the Handmaids show respect, the Econowives spit and make faces. The Handmaids are despised by most every other group, even though they represent their society’s only hope for prosperity.

Offred’s life as a Handmaid, then, differs dramatically from her past life as a daughter, a wife, and a mother in “the time before.” Many experiences in her present life lead her to remember those roles, no matter how she tries to avoid it. The first of these memories arises when she describes the Commander’s Wife. Offred explains how the Wife works in the flower garden and observes “many of the Wives have such gardens, it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for” (16). Because the Wife cannot have children, Offred realizes that her own presence in the household

serves “as a reproach to her; and a necessity” (17), and she can understand why the Wife resents her. The Wife stands as an example of the unnecessary sterile women in Gilead. Her husband interacts with her as little as possible; her condition shows how devalued all women have become. Adrienne Rich describes how “absence of respect for women’s lives is written into the heart of male theological doctrine, into the structure of the patriarchal family, and into the very language of patriarchal ethics” (269). The outcome of the absence is a society in which all women are less valuable. The Wife in *The Handmaid’s Tale* has a few comparative privileges, though. She can drink alcohol and gossip freely with other women, and she is able to choose gardening and knitting as activities to occupy her time while she has no child. There is no other work for her to do in the household since there are servants to cook, clean, and carry out errands.

The act of gardening, a luxury afforded only to the upper-echelon Wives, reminds Offred of her earlier life. In her present time, the images from the garden are much more meaningful than they were in the past. Raising flowers and vegetables somewhat resembles raising children; it is the closest to mothering the Wife can get until her Handmaid succeeds in producing a child. Frequently throughout the novel, images of bulbs and seeds appear and suggest sexual activity. Red tulips grow in the Wife’s garden. Their color and the precise way the Wife tends them represent how the Wife controls her Handmaid, who must always be obedient and dress in red clothing. Dandelions contrast with tulips; on one occasion they remind Offred of her daughter, and she also notices one at the women’s salvaging toward the end of the novel. These two contrasting floral images, one cultivated and temporary, the other wild and resistant

to control, might represent the artificial order of Gilead and the wild, chaotic, and more natural order of the “time before,” respectively.

The passages related to flowers remind readers about the distinctions between Wives and Handmaids. The Wife’s second hobby, knitting, implies other desires as well. Offred notes the elaborate, intricate designs she incorporates into her scarves and suspects that the Wife purposely unravels the scarves as soon as she finishes them. This activity brings to mind Penelope waiting for Odysseus. What is this Wife waiting for? There are no suitors angling for her attention. Offred reports no evidence of how the Wife will handle the hoped-for child if he or she ever becomes real. Presumably, the child will be handed off to another domestic servant until he or she becomes eligible for marriage. The Wife’s main motivation for wanting that child, as far as Offred can tell, is the favorable attention it will bring her. The Commander will get promoted, the other Wives will bring gifts, and their household will be envied. They would celebrate the baby’s birth more because it would represent the family’s higher status rather than because he or she might bring joy or fulfillment as a new life. The attitude toward new babies in Gilead contrasts strikingly with most modern views, which Sarah Ruddick depicts as celebratory on account of the promise a new life represents (*Maternal Thinking* 209).

Offred’s memories also include details about her feminist activist mother. Throughout the novel, her recollections reveal the complex nature of their relationship. Offred remembers her mother taking her to a gathering of women who burned pornography at a park. Later, she recounts a conversation between herself and her mother about her mother’s deliberate choice to have a child and raise her as a single

parent. She tells Offred that some of her friends were critical because of her age- she was thirty-seven (154). They reminded her about increased odds for birth defects and the difficulties that come with single parenthood. These friends seem to discount the widespread historical traditions of women helping other women mother their children (Rich 12). Offred's mother discounted her friends' concerns about her ability to support a child on her own. She rationalized at the time, "I make a decent salary. I can afford daycare" (155). Her mother's example is a problematic model for Offred because it offers her no guidance. Offred certainly does not want to reproduce the mothering she received in the way that Chodorow theorizes. Neglect characterizes her mother's parenting style. Offred recalls some incidents from her childhood in terms of what she was doing without her mother (watching television while her mother slept in is mentioned twice, implying a sense of loneliness or desertion). Her mother's absence during those early years stands out more than any events. Bousoon notes that "while the Wife is a menacing presence in Offred's life, her mother is both physically and emotionally absent" (142). Offred's ideas about both the Wife she must serve and the mother she has lost intersect in interesting ways.

When Offred first joins the Commander's household, she hopes to find a maternal bond with the Commander's Wife. Her desire is understandable, as mother figures can be just as supportive and nurturing as biological mothers, as literary characters from *Jane Eyre* to *Lily Briscoe* have shown. Offred relates the first meeting between herself and the Wife with a tone of disappointment: "I wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me" (21). Finding no such inclination on the part of the Wife, Offred begins her solitary life in

the house. Ironically, this first meeting also reminds Offred of her own mother, because she realizes that she recognizes the Commander's Wife from television. The woman Offred now serves formerly worked as a television evangelist known as Serena Joy. Offred remembers watching her on the "Growing Souls Gospel Hour" while her mother slept- this small connection seems significant. How many other women were "sleeping in" while drastic changes swept through their worlds? Were they exhausted from working alone- trying to raise a family while working, without a network of friends, relatives, or partners to contribute to their children's well-being? Were they busy activists, like Offred's mother seems to have been? Or were they simply selfish or lazy? Any of these descriptors might fit Offred's mother. At first, she seems like one of the "bad mothers" Atwood is known for employing.

Another startling reminder of her mother occurs when Offred describes the classes she attended while undergoing training at the Red Center. The Aunts in charge of indoctrinating the handmaids show a film in which women protesters marched in a "Take Back the Night" rally. The Aunts hold up those who participate in these peaceful demonstrations which are usually focused on raising awareness about and preventing violence against women as examples of the evil, pro-choice "Unwomen" who deserve blame for the violence perpetrated against them in former times. Offred sees her mother in the old film; then and later, her view of her mother changes. She comes to see her mother as a strong, "spunky" (155) force to be reckoned with, rather than a preoccupied, inattentive absent mother. Her mother taught Offred to "steel" herself (206) and this skill has obviously been important to Offred's survival.

Offred did not find a mother figure in the Wife, but she becomes almost like a daughter to the Commander, once he lets her into his private study. There, they play Scrabble, he shares his contraband reading materials, and he reveals some of the rationale behind the changes in their society. One night in the Commander's study, Offred looks over a women's magazine from the 1970's and finds images of confident women (201). These images provide a vivid example of the threat men like the Commander perceived. This clearly relates to Rich when she explains how patriarchy begins with men's "fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women" (13). Their fear leads them to respond with numerous restrictions as they attempt to maintain control. The men of Gilead saw women who had a measure of freedom and a purpose outside of the domestic sphere as a threat, a problem that needed to be corrected. Men, in charge for so long, did not want to lose their power. This provided impetus for imposing the strict rules of Gilead, though the Commander tries to frame their reasons for establishing the highly restrictive society in terms of protection and safety. He explains,

This way they all get a man, nobody's left out. And then if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they'd have to go on welfare. Or else he'd stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children left in daycare or left with some brutal ignorant woman, and they'd have to pay for that themselves, out of their wretched little paychecks. Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on

the whole business. This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. (284)

Adrienne Rich sees this attitude as the quintessential anti-"liberated woman" argument (43).

Psychoanalytic/feminist critic J. Brooks Bouson would argue that Offred's mother is a scapegoat- one of the casualties who exemplifies "the New Right's deliberate scapegoating of independent, autonomous women and its insistence on the restoration of women's traditional roles" (158). How could she have known exactly what to do as a mother during those changing times? If Chodorow's theories are correct, mothers reproduce the mothering they received. When an individual decides to step out of known patterns and expectations, she has no way to get help or guidance because she is choosing to go first. Offred's mother is the first example of many I have found throughout the three novels I have studied who does not seem to have the social group that Ruddick emphasizes as an important influence on women's mothering. Not having "a set of people with whom she identifies to the degree that she would count failure to meet their criteria of acceptability as her failure" (*Maternal Thinking* 21) sets Offred's mother apart from her peers. This may have freed her somewhat, but it left her vulnerable at the same time.

Whatever struggles Offred experienced at the hands of her mother, Offred also appears to readers as an intelligent, self-aware, and loving adult. At least some of those positive qualities must result from her upbringing. She and her mother still have a relationship when Offred is grown, though it is far from perfect. The mother often criticizes her daughter, drinks heavily, and complains about feeling intensely lonely

(157). Offred's guilt in the present time of the narrative indicates the regret she feels for not showing her mother more kindness, understanding, or forgiveness in the past. Remembering a hurtful statement she once hurled at her mother, she says, "I want her back. I want everything back, the way it was" (157). Her remorse proves that regardless of past problems and present difficulties, she values her relationship with her mother and wishes she could recover it.

Once the Commander lets Offred in on some privileged information, she is at once treated like an intelligent adult (because he gives her access to reading materials) and "like a child" (Bouson 138-9). She is like a daughter in the Oedipal sense because she is much younger than the Commander, he calls her "the fair little one" (307), and her job requires her to have sex with him. If he is viewed as a father figure, his relationship with Offred constitutes incest, one further example of the flaws in this new system (Bouson 145). Bouson also declares, "*The Handmaid's Tale* is preoccupied with the bad mother, while the good mother is essentially absent from the text" (141). Serena Joy, the other Wives, the Aunts, and the Marthas all personify the most damaging aspect of motherhood- the failures. Offred's own failure to become pregnant highlights her loss of control in the new order but also "acknowledges some common female anxieties about pregnancy and motherhood" (Bouson 143). Offred reaches the point of hopeful desire for pregnancy because it helps ensure her survival; her failure to succeed results through no fault on her part, but she is blamed by others and blames herself as though she has some control over the matter.

I do see a good mother in the text, contrary to Bouson's assertion. The good mother is Offred in "the time before." When she and her husband Luke planned their

lives together, they consciously decided to have children. Their daughter was most definitely wanted and loved. The thought they devoted to her existence stands as one clear example of that. Another supporting detail appears when Offred recalls their conversations about buying a bigger home in order to have plenty of room for their children to play (32). Their plans regarding the house may not have come to fruition, but they did have a child, a daughter, at a later time. Losing her has been the most devastating experience of Offred's life. The snippets of memories concerning her daughter get hastily brushed away; on one occasion, the smell of freshly baked bread triggers her memory: "It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother" (62). This statement highlights the contrast between her mother and herself, and the emphasis on the past tense verb "was" poignantly reminds readers about what the narrator has lost.

Offred gives no clues as to how she feels about the possibility that she is pregnant at the end of the novel. In contrast to the child she wanted when she was married to Luke, no certainty exists for her in her present time, even if the baby is healthy. Her attitude toward her daughter from the time before and the future child differ understandably; before, she assumed a lifelong relationship would follow childbirth. In those days, her commitment would have been understood as "an interactive base of expectations of continuity of relationship" (Chodorow 34). Continuous mother-child relationships have vanished in Offred's present time. The only thriving child mentioned is Offred's own daughter. When Offred catches herself thinking about the little girl, she quickly changes focus. "Not here and now. Not where people are looking" (37), she

scolds herself after one such incident. One night the smell of the soap triggers memories of bathing her daughter, and she explains some of the other memories that have risen since their separation. "She comes back to me at different ages. This is how I know she is not really a ghost. If she were a ghost she would be the same age always" (82). Readers can sense strong maternal love and even some faint hope in this memory- Offred has no proof her daughter is dead, but she has little reason to believe she is still alive. She remembers nearly losing her daughter once before, but the brief crisis ended happily (83). Remembering that tense situation might also be a coping mechanism Offred uses to allow herself to imagine that her present situation can be overcome and have a happy ending. Her love for her daughter is undeniable in the past, and it endures in the present.

The story of their last day together contrasts with that hopeful thought, however. The day Offred and her husband and daughter tried to escape the oppressive regime by fleeing to Canada, something went wrong and they were pursued by authorities with guns. Husband and wife were separated, with Offred remaining with their daughter. The nightmarish details of their thwarted escape attempt include the moment when they had to lie down on the ground and Offred covered her daughter's body with her own to protect her. Offred makes a heartbreaking remark on that moment: "she's too young, it's too late, we come apart" (97). The intensity of this recollection strikes me as a key moment. Though some time has passed since their separation, Offred uses present tense and does not lay specific blame on any party. The reasons the mother and child "come apart" are too numerous and complicated for her to explicate. After that, Offred's memory is blank. Any other thoughts about her daughter remain unstated for the most

part. Atwood's narrative style implies that Offred has consciously tried to avoid thinking about her child. Repressing those painful memories helps keep her from thinking about the child. She must do that because remembering would be too depressing; her situation is dire enough with reminders of the Handmaid who occupied her position previously and hanged herself in the same room where Offred spends the majority of her time. Offred consciously resists so much as revealing the child's name anywhere in her narrative. She uses the phrase "my daughter" only two times throughout the tale (229, 231). Other times, she refers to her only with third person pronouns "she" or "her." This also suggests an attempt to put distance between herself and her daughter, which is perhaps another coping mechanism.

The ending of the novel intimates that the society of Gilead was short-lived. One logical reason for that outcome must be the disjointed relationships between mothers and children or the complete absence of mothers. Children (also old women as reported on page 198) are absent almost entirely in the plot. I see an implicit warning here that relates politics and religion to the deterioration and devaluation of mother-child bonds. Children born into this new society are not loved in any recognizable way. The status they bring seems to be the end goal. The children are only coveted before they are born and play no role in the plot until they come of age and participate in the mass marriage ceremony at the "Prayvaganza" (282-3). What happened next is up to readers' speculation. The cycle presumably repeated itself until fertility rates improved, or a new power took over and reorganized society.

Margaret Atwood corrects readers and critics who call *The Handmaid's Tale* science fiction; she insists that it is speculative fiction. Interviewer Gabriele Metzler

quotes Atwood at the beginning of a 1994 interview about this preference: “There is nothing in the book that hasn’t already happened. All things described in the book people have already done to each other” (277). Atwood told interviewers for *The New Scientist* in 2003 that “A lot of science fiction is fantasy. It’s people flying around on dragons, other worlds of strange life forms... **Speculative** fiction is when you have all the materials to actually do it.” The dangers represented in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are real dangers that already exist, not possible future problems. Atwood’s goal in the novel includes raising awareness about the real problems in order to remedy them. The disconnections between mothers and children were certainly real problems in 1985, and they persist today. More notably, extreme right wing political and religious movements were in full force then as now. Reading *The Handmaid’s Tale* might encourage readers to take stock of their own maternal relationships and outside forces that attempt to limit mothers’ freedoms and power. Coral Ann Howells posits Atwood’s purpose in the novel, and the function of any dystopian novel is “to send out danger signals to its readers” (161). Annette Kolodny finds the root of the problem is “racist anxiety at the declining Caucasian birthrate” that results in a “white supremacist ideology and a skewed reinstitution of the patriarchal family” (102). Patriarchal culture is inherently misogynist, according to J. Brooks Bouson, who notes that the book was written at the height of 1980’s fundamentalist backlash against feminism (157). She also labels the text as a “feminist dystopia” (137). While the men in charge of Gilead certainly have every reason to want their way to continue, their minority rule creates a dystopia that negatively affects children as well as women. Removing women’s control over their

bodies and their children causes great suffering. Curtailing that suffering must be one of Atwood's goals.

Today, women still face difficult decisions about whether or not to become mothers. If they decide to have children, their obstacles might include fertility problems, financial hardships, balancing work with home life, and being barred from parenting with a same-sex partner. For those who choose not to be mothers, abortion still causes intense controversy. Women have maintained their presence in the workforce, but they still do not always receive equal pay for equal work. All of these issues echo the climate of "the time before" Gilead. The men who take charge in Gilead do everything in their (substantial, almost total) power to remove any power from women. Their goals are doomed to fail-- there can be no society without mothers. One of the most important messages for women reading this novel is to pay attention to the political sphere in order to recognize when their rights are being threatened.

CHAPTER III. *ORYX AND CRAKE*

The epigraph to *Oryx and Crake* (2003) comes from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: "Was there no safety?" In Woolf's 1927 novel, Mrs. Ramsay's sudden death on page 128 shocks readers who see her as the center of the plot. After Mrs. Ramsay vanishes unexpectedly in the middle of the novel, her absence becomes a character. Losing the one binding force that once held the Ramsay family and their circle of friends together severely disrupts the peaceful world they once inhabited. These stunning moments foreshadow World War I in a way that links private, personal events to catastrophic events that shatter the outside world. Jimmy, the "Snowman" of *Oryx and Crake*, relates his individual experiences in relation to his mother and his lover in suspenseful ways that foretell the global disaster he manages to survive. His story also includes telling details about the troubled maternal relationships that shaped the title characters.

Oryx and Crake offers plentiful examples of failed mother-child relationships. Jimmy's complicated relationship with his mother is developed most thoroughly. Her distance, depression, and distraction stem from the work she does. Like Offred's mother in *The Handmaid's Tale*, she stays busy working. Unlike Offred's mother (whose career is never specified), Jimmy's mother works for a large bio-technology corporation. Her professional status as a microbiologist, unthinkable in the patriarchal culture of Gilead, should make a progressive, positive statement about women's achievement of equality. Her work ultimately threatens her sanity, though. As a result, she abandons her only child.

Readers learn through Jimmy about the differences between his world and the early 21st century world. Many of the changes are technological. Scientists create food substitutes, hybrid animals, and life forms used only to generate transplant tissue. There are several examples of scientific advancements applied to human reproduction as well; wealthy couples can create children with made-to-order specifications. Even more than in Gilead, children are described as the result of breeding. Those children born into the time of the novel are largely left alone to parent themselves; no positive mothers or mother figures help the main characters. These examples illustrate the failings of this future society.

From the beginning, Jimmy remembers his relationship with his mother as strained. When he was a child, she expected him to be bright and understand her work. “She often tried to explain things to him; then she got discouraged. These were the worst moments, for both of them. He resisted her, he pretended he didn’t understand even when he did, he acted stupid, but he didn’t want her to give up on him” (21). As a little boy, he wanted unconditional love that she could not always provide. It seems clear that Jimmy’s mother experienced some of the “undeniable anger” Adrienne Rich finds that connects all mothers (24). Jimmy’s mother felt the pressure Rich reports also in that “the woman at home... is not believed to be doing serious work” (38). His mother’s job at the lab put a considerable strain on her, but she seemed happier when she was working full-time than after she quit the job and stayed home with her son. Jimmy never finds out the reasons behind that decision. Unlike many women, she quits working when her son goes to school. She continues to do her own research at home on her computer, though the specific kind of work remains unstated. Jimmy observes changes

in her when she works: “she seemed to be enjoying herself. She was friendly then, too. She was like a real mother and he was like a real child” (30). Her mercurial moods perplex her son; he describes her as often depressed and sullen. He recounts his efforts to please her, which often met with annoyance. On good days, Jimmy found her a bit frightening, a bit too much like an image of a perfect mother. She seems like an example of Chodorow and Contratto’s modern woman, attempting to be the ideal mother while working and taking care of her husband (79). Jimmy quickly realizes that he must bend to his mother’s moods and learns to find ways of getting her attention. More than anything, he seeks to get any reaction out of her, even if it is negative. Jimmy’s common adolescent attention-getting behavior underscores his mother’s neglectful parenting style, eliciting readers’ sympathy for Jimmy.

Unique among Atwood’s protagonists because he is male, Jimmy shows that daughters are not the only ones hurt by bad mothers. He recalls that his mother often forgot his birthday, and when reminded, she would buy him gifts that showed she either knew or cared very little about her son (50). Their tense relationship continued after the family moved on to another compound. Jimmy’s father had taken a new job and insisted the move would help them stay safe in an increasingly chaotic society. Their new home, with increased security features, served to make his mother feel “like a prisoner” (53) rather than safe. Finally, Jimmy’s parents find that they are incompatible because his mother disagrees with the ethics of her husband’s new projects. She feels he has crossed the line of responsible science. As Jimmy grows up, he continues to feel distanced from his parents. He uses their domestic strife as material for puppet shows to amuse his classmates at school. His attention-seeking adolescent “class

clown” behavior ties in to feeling neglected by his mother. One day, Jimmy comes home to an empty house and a note on the kitchen table. Before he reads it, he knows “what sort of note it would be” (61). She leaves Jimmy and his father abruptly, recounting her reasons in the note. Jimmy does not relate many specific details, including only “*no longer participate in a lifestyle that is not only meaningless in itself...*” (61) and a post-script that explains her reasons for taking Jimmy’s pet (a genetically modified cross-bred raccoon/skunk creature referred to as a “rakunk” and named Killer). Jimmy’s omission of details relates to his self-centered adolescent stage of development and his coping strategy. He is understandably more concerned about himself and the loss of his pet than he is about figuring out what exactly troubled his mother so much that she had to leave. “Wasn’t there supposed to be a maternal bond?” (61), he questions when looking back on these events as an adult.

What happened to that supposed bond? What drove his mother to wreck her husband’s computer and abandon him and her son? Jimmy hints through his finger-puppet routines that her anger went beyond the typical anger mothers experience. Adrienne Rich provides harrowing accounts of the tragedy that can result from “the invisible violence of the institution of motherhood” (277), but Jimmy’s mother seems to flee for other reasons. Jimmy wonders if his mother left because she found out his father was having an affair: “maybe that was why she’d fled- or part of the reason. You don’t take a hammer- not to mention an electric screwdriver and a pipe wrench- to a guy’s computer without being quite angry” (66). Jimmy finds that explanation too simplistic, however. He knows for certain her anger had other sources as well. Again, Jimmy’s welfare is not her primary concern, but other changes occurring in the world

were too difficult for his mother to accept. “There were the things his mother rambled on about sometimes, about how everything was being ruined and would never be the same again” (63), he remembers when asked by the security officers trying to piece together her disappearance. Here, Jimmy’s mother seems quite similar to Offred’s mother in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The officers discount those nostalgic concerns, though, because they sound cliché; they were too much like the complaints most everyone had. People who worried about such matters seemed silly and pointless to Jimmy, too. Here, he hints at some of the other disturbing events in the world, including rising ocean levels, droughts, fires, and other extreme conditions presumably caused by global warming. Because the world has always been like this to Jimmy, he does not feel the nostalgia for the way things were before. This may constitute the fundamental rift between him and his mother— they cannot relate to one another because their world views differ too much. This underscores the idea that the rapidly changing events in the larger society cause the problems between mother and child, not the other way around.

Jimmy mourns his mother throughout the rest of the novel. At first, his feelings confuse him because his mother was not typically nurturing or supportive. He also misses his pet, so both absences get mixed up and result in some interesting parallels: “Killer was a tame animal, she’d be helpless on her own, she wouldn’t know how to fend for herself, everything hungry would tear her into furry black and white pieces” (61). These possibilities sound eerily familiar to the reasons men like the Commander from *The Handmaid’s Tale* traditionally give when they warn women/mothers to stay in their homes. Jimmy has internalized ideas about patriarchy in a way that connects mothers to safety. He thinks in what Adrienne Rich describes as the “male institutional voice”

(44); placing mothers in the home reinforces patriarchal structures. Jimmy later realizes that the animals were able to adapt successfully to the wild; they survived when most humans did not. He considers the possibility that his mother may have been better off by leaving also. Atwood seems to make an underlying argument for allowing more freedom for women/mothers here that continues from *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Jimmy's father attempts to fill the void left by his mother, but fails to compensate for the little bit of consistent care she offered. He marries Ramona, a colleague from his laboratory, who tries earnestly to connect with Jimmy. Jimmy respectfully appreciates Ramona's efforts and even likes her. Still, he misses his mother, "strange, insufficient, miserable," (67) and troubled as she was. Like Offred and her mother, they were not perfect examples of mothers and children, but they managed in a way. Chodorow and Contratto offer a theory that allows for imperfection (80). Using their framework, mothers like Offred's and Jimmy's retain their value when others acknowledge that no mother can ever be perfect.

Surprisingly, Jimmy does not question why his mother did not take him along with her. She attempts to keep in contact with her son, but never explains why she left on her own. Jimmy occasionally receives postcards from mysterious people and places, and understands those to be from his mother. All communication with her is cryptic because she knows her messages will be scrutinized by the powerful security officers who work for the corporations. Freer than the women of Gilead because she is allowed at least to read and write, she must encode her messages to avoid leaving a traceable trail. One day, after a long period of no contact, Jimmy catches a glimpse of his mother on television and has a powerful reaction: "Jimmy saw her clearly—her frowning

eyebrows, her candid blue eyes, her determined mouth. Love jolted through him, abrupt and painful, followed by anger. It was like being kicked: he must have let out a gasp” (181). Here, the child’s experience of simultaneous love and anger reflects the mother’s corresponding feelings found in Rich’s work. These experiences have certainly affected Jimmy, but he says out loud to no one in the present time: “I am not my childhood” (68), sounding like an adult who has been through therapy to help him cope with his problems. Readers find out more about Jimmy’s struggles after his mother’s departure as the novel continues. After his mother, Jimmy’s friend Crake has the most significant impact on his life.

Glenn (aka “Crake”) moved to town just before Jimmy’s mother disappeared. Jimmy remembers how much his mother liked Glenn and how she seemed to prefer his friend when she would compare the two boys. He feels he himself has disappointed her somehow, and that she has the wrong idea about Glenn overall. His later actions make it difficult for Jimmy to think of Glenn as anything but his alter ego, Crake. He thinks, “there was never any real Glenn, *Glenn* was only a disguise” (71). Jimmy’s friendship with Crake develops as Jimmy copes with his mother’s abandonment. In a way, Crake seems to take Jimmy’s mother’s place in his life. Crake is a poor substitution, though, because he is only a year older than Jimmy and tends to bring out the worst in him. He is a constant in Jimmy’s life, however, which is more than his mother turned out to be. His ties with Crake outlast the time Jimmy had with his mother by many years. He and Crake spent their adolescent years playing violent games and watching violent and pornographic programs online. Jimmy’s father and stepmother pay him little attention;

Ramona's idea of taking care of him mostly involves making sure he has enough to eat. Their lives revolve around trying to have a baby, so they pay little attention to Jimmy.

Through their nearly constant interaction, Jimmy eventually learns about Crake's family. Crake's mother "was out a lot, or in a hurry; she worked as a diagnostician at the hospital" (88). Her marriage to a man known as "Uncle Pete" followed the death of her first husband, Crake's father. That man died under mysterious circumstances after deserting his wife and son in a manner very similar to Jimmy's mother's departure. Crake's father taught Crake to play chess, but other than that Crake remembers only, "He didn't always watch where he was going. He was head in the clouds. He believed in contributing to the improvement of the human lot" (183). Crake's comment foreshadows his later actions; he certainly changes the human condition. It is unclear if he honestly felt it was an improvement to wipe out the human race and start over with completely new creatures. Crake may have been sincere if he believed that present day humans were not salvageable; his disillusionment is completely understandable when he later explains that his father figured out that the pharmaceutical corporations were engineering diseases and medicines to treat them in order to increase their profits.

Losing his father at a young age, Crake might be expected to form a closer bond with his mother. Crake's mother does not fit the mold of typical patriarchal mothers of sons, whom Adrienne Rich depicts as living only for their boys (186). However, Crake's mother does not share a close relationship her son, and he shows no emotional reaction when she dies just before his high school graduation. Her work brought her into contact with "a hot bioform that had chewed through her like a solar mower" (176). Jimmy hints that the incident was contrived, and not an accident. Crake watched his

mother literally dissolve, and Jimmy remembers his account: “though he could see her lips moving, he couldn’t hear what she was saying. ‘Otherwise put, just like daily life’” (177). Crake’s disdain for his mother might stem from her inattention to him, and Jimmy can relate somewhat. He still finds Crake’s callous detachment difficult to understand. The main difference between the two boys becomes clear here. Jimmy forgives his mother for leaving and hopes she will survive, while Crake seems glad to have his problematic mother out of the way.

Jimmy’s state of mind does not improve much when he goes to college. Ramona still attempts to take on the role of mother, but Jimmy does not appreciate her efforts. He begins to think of his mother wistfully, imagining that “she was off having cutting-edge adventures on her own” (175). He resents Ramona for obviously trying to get pregnant, as it reminds him that the adults want “a more satisfactory baby than Jimmy had ever been to anybody” (176). At this time, he adapts some of Crake’s attitudes as he finds no parents preferable to bad ones: “‘Who cares, who cares,’ he’d whispered to himself. He didn’t want to have a father anyway, or be a father, or have a son or be one. He wanted to be himself, alone, unique, self-created and self-sufficient” (176). This desire to overcome the need for parents serves to keep him emotionally distant from most everyone in his life. It also helps him cope with losing his mother completely and his father effectively. His life remains miserably unhappy, though. Ramona tries to keep up her role by sending Jimmy email updates related to her attempts to have a child. Those messages reveal dramatic technological changes in the process:

If nothing “natural” happened soon, she said, they’d try “something else” from one of the agencies—Infantade, Foetility, Perfectababe, one of

those. Things had changed a lot in the field since Jimmy came along!
(*Came along*, as if he hadn't actually been born, but had just sort of
dropped by for a visit.) She was doing her "research," because of course
they wanted the best for their money.

Terrific, thought Jimmy. They'd have a few trial runs, and if the kids from
those didn't measure up they'd recycle them for the parts, until at last they
got something that fit all their specs-- perfect in every way, not only a math
whiz but beautiful as the dawn. Then they'd load up this hypothetical
wonderkid up with their bloated expectations until the poor tyke burst
under the strain. Jimmy didn't envy him.

(He envied him.) (250).

The contrast here between "natural" pregnancy/childbirth and the new options
references modern reproductive science that have increased odds of conceiving but
further complicated issues of parenting. Jimmy clearly finds the new methods cold and
inhumane, while simultaneously wishing to get beyond his own unsatisfying existence.
The application of fertility drugs, cloning, and genetic engineering already exists today,
so the idea that Jimmy's father and Ramona might custom-order a child in the near
future does not seem far-fetched. These innovations would have been extremely
helpful to the men in charge of Gilead because through the new means, the role of the
mother could be further minimized. Sarah Ruddick finds that increased technological
intervention "re-describes the birth as a controlled production rather than a physically
innovative act" (49) and Adria Schwartz finds that current technologies lead to an
increased "commodification of motherhood" (245). These ideas about technology and

motherhood have carried over into Jimmy's time as well. Jimmy finds the new methods distasteful, hinting that he sides with his mother on issues related to technology and nature.

Jimmy revisits his thoughts about new fertility methods when as adults, Crake shows him the shops where consumers purchase the products created by his corporation. Crake's team of scientists develops products that allow customers to change gender, sexual orientation, height, skin tone, and eye color; Jimmy wonders if this is where his father and Ramona "had gone shopping" (289). The technological changes between 1985 and 2003 become even clearer here, but this section also provides evidence of people who genuinely want children. The problems in Jimmy's world seem arise once those children are born. Unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is no shortage of children, but children do seem equally commodified. In both Jimmy's world and Gilead, a gap has opened between the desire for children and the long-term care they require. The only explanation for this disconnect in Jimmy's story seems tied to the adults (both mothers and fathers) being too caught up in advancing their careers. They pursue technological advances at all costs because that is what is most valued in their culture. Children, meanwhile, are left to their own devices.

Jimmy uses his abandonment story to elicit sympathy from girls, and this tactic works well. He shares his by now "mythical" (191) story about his mother with many lovers, some of whom try take on the role of Jimmy's mother for short time periods. For a while, Jimmy behaves like women who feel "unmothered" in Adrienne Rich's work (242). Though he does not seek mothers all his life the way Rich describes, he does let some girlfriends attempt to reform him. Jimmy always ends the relationships, though, so

he remains in control. This seems like a result of his “being dumped” (191) by his mother as a child. He resists any reminders of his childhood, not even wanting to be in a place like Crake’s laboratory because it has so much in common with his “former life” (205). As an adult, though, Jimmy seems content to remain childish. His affairs with women who were “all married or the equivalent” (251) provide little more than distraction for him. He copes with his feelings of abandonment by ensuring that no relationship with any woman will ever end the same way. He controls the conditions, and always gets out before the women have a chance to leave him first. This tactic protects him from heartbreak until he gets involved with “Oryx,” an online pseudonym for a young woman whose real name never appears.

Oryx’s story is also closely tied to losing her mother. While Jimmy and Glenn were neglected by mothers who were not able to give them much attention, Oryx was sold by her loving mother out of desperation. Her story continues sadly, though she seems numbed to the abuses she has suffered. Her separation from her mother may have hardened her to the effects of physical pain and sexual exploitation, causing her to become less human. Oryx’s experience recalls Offred’s, and also closely resembles that of African-American slave women, whose experiences with “widespread institutionalized rape” (Collins 65) has resulted in generations of emotionally troubled mothers and children. Oryx seems content to exist only in the virtual sense, much like the online personae Jimmy and Glenn used when they played as adolescents. Oryx sometimes appears to mother Jimmy in his memories. She shares common features with his mother, also. Jimmy recalls that Oryx was “always evasive. You can never pin her down” (110). Jimmy peppers Oryx with questions when they are new friends and

lovers, but she will not give many straight answers or elaborate details. Oryx tolerates Jimmy's interrogations and tries to redirect him instead. The small pieces of information she does reveal inform Jimmy that Oryx came from a disadvantaged village somewhere outside of the U.S. Her family was poor, her father was sick, and there were many children to feed. Oryx's mother received payment when she sent Oryx with a man who came to their village under the auspices of taking on apprentices. The villagers knew that there were no apprenticeships for their children, but there was little hope for them if they remained, especially the girls. Oryx explained the handicap carried by girl children: "they would only get married and make more children, who would then have to get sold in their turn. Sold, or thrown in the river, to float away to the sea, because there was only so much food to go around" (116-117). Oryx's blunt account of the cycle of poverty she was born into varies little from real conditions Patricia Hill Collins finds common for many racial ethnic mothers and children. Collins relates how these mothers' "struggles for maternal empowerment" are a part of the "physical or psychological separation of mothers and children designed to disempower racial ethnic individuals" that comprise "a systematic effort to disempower their communities" (65).

Jimmy has trouble understanding Oryx's life because it varies so much from his own relatively comfortable existence. Oryx tells him that emotional displays in her village were not uncommon when the children were taken: "sometimes the mothers would cry, and also the children, but the mothers would tell the children that what they were doing was good, they were helping their families, and they should go with the man" (121). This passage illustrates a key difference between Jimmy and Oryx. Collins also identifies the key differences between mothering for white, privileged Jimmy and

minority, impoverished Oryx as “the struggles for survival... by ensuring the survival of children are a fundamental dimension of racial ethnic women’s motherwork” (61).

Jimmy’s mother had been disappointing, but she put herself in danger, not her son.

Jimmy’s mother never faced a decision like Oryx’s mother faced because his physical survival was not threatened as immediately or as critically as Oryx’s. The class and economic differences between Jimmy and Oryx account for some of the reason Jimmy never finds his love for her completely returned.

The man who buys Oryx and the other children from her village tells the guards he is the children’s uncle and bribes his way across a border. When one guard doubtfully comments on how many nieces and nephews the man has, the man explains, “all their mothers die” (125). This may not be true literally, but the children never get a chance to see their mothers again, rendering them as good as dead. Oryx’s childhood experiences also offer some explanation about why she might have accepted Crake’s plan for annihilating the human race with his project. She may have truly believed she was helping the greater good-- and who could blame her, after the exploitation she suffered? Her sympathies would not lie with the ranks of those who abused her, and though she is vague about it, it stands to reason that there were many abusers. Oryx spent the rest of her life far from her mother, and could not remember much about her after their separation. Thus, her experience of mothering ended at a very early age. The girls who leave the village with the man, of course, do not really learn a trade. Instead, they are used as prostitutes and kept in squalid conditions. Oryx remembers living through these terrible times, eventually ending up in the U.S. and working for a pornographer. Her stories about those experiences are brief, and she recounts them

without much emotion. She has found a way to cope and survive, similar to Offred. In her study on the Gothic elements of Atwood's novels, Colette Tennant recognizes how Crake takes advantage of Oryx. Crake knows about Oryx's abuse, and she obediently serves as a pivotal agent in his plan to decimate human life. She is the perfect mule for opportunistic Crake; being abused has taught her not to question orders or feel any emotion about what she is asked to do. Tennant calls Oryx "a futuristic Pandora, an Atwoodian Eve used to unknowingly spread the evils Crake believes mankind deserves" (139). Surprisingly, Oryx becomes another mother figure to Jimmy. Though she is several years younger and has arguably had a much more difficult path in life, Jimmy relies on her to give his life purpose. Jimmy's love for Oryx sustains him throughout the novel, even long after she has died. In providing nurturance to Jimmy, Oryx has not completely fallen into the category Sara Ruddick depicts, those who "are unable to respond because they themselves are victims of violence and neglect" ("Thinking" 33).

Jimmy's waning interest in all women except Oryx disappears completely after seeing his mother's execution. Security officers keep contact with him over the years, and one visit leads to this discovery. Some love for her makes him regret confirming her identity after he watches the video. He holds on to hope that "the whole thing was a fake" (259) and desperately wishes he had not provided any incriminating testimony. Deep down, however, he feels certain that his mother is really gone.

Jimmy grieves for his mother in earnest and plots revenge, but fails to find a way to achieve it. He takes a job Crake offers, advertising the products created by Crake and his team. Their inventions include a pill that enhances sexual desire, prevents sexually transmitted diseases, and prolongs youth while at the same time causing

sterility (294). That drug, in combination with the genetically engineered children created in Crake's laboratory, comprise the ultimate plan Crake has masterminded. Jimmy's work on the newly developed creatures, or "Crakers" as Jimmy comes to call them, was relegated to marketing and advertising. Crake's premise is to offer "totally chosen babies that would incorporate any feature, physical or mental or spiritual, that the buyer might wish to select" (304). Crake's real goal is for these beautiful, docile, and healthy creatures to replace the human race. Jimmy's job does not allow him access to that bit of information, and he works in ignorance of Crake's master plan.

Once Crake's plan succeeds, Jimmy sees Crake's true motives, and he is left alone with a small group of these new creatures. Crake believed their own time was the dystopia. Rampant abuse of technology had rendered regular people helpless in the hands of the scientific community. Their illnesses were all designed and cured by the corporations, but most people had little reason to want to live. The future seemed so bleak to Crake that he decided to wipe the slate clean and hope that his engineered beings would fare better. Crake took on the role of mother by creating these beings, but he either could not handle the intense responsibility of caring for them or he simply had no interest in living through the horrifying aftermath of his actions. Crake's world view allowed him to simultaneously create and destroy. This can be interpreted as a direct result of his upbringing. Without a mother or substitute figure to nurture him, Crake works under the assumption that he alone sees the impossibility of fixing what is wrong in the world. He recognizes that patriarchal capitalist oppression has been replaced by technology, much the same as Donna Haraway explains in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (Leitch 2267). Atwood employs Crake as an embodiment of Haraway's warning.

Crake's response represents the most extreme result of what could happen when "in the consciousness of our failures, we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connection" (2281). Crake consciously removes any human connection almost completely from the new life forms he creates.

While designing the new, ostensibly more perfect creatures, Crake tries to streamline childcare. Jimmy remembers, "too much time was wasted in child-rearing, Crake used to say. Childrearing, and being a child" (158). Crake's inability to cope with the outcomes of his actions explains why he hands the "Crakers" over to Jimmy. Crake's childhood provided little for him aside from access to education and technology; he had no nurturing models to follow. Crake's death forces Jimmy into the mothering role, even though his upbringing also failed to prepare him for it. Once the Crakers begin to ask questions about their origins, Jimmy assigns Crake the role of creator and depicts Oryx as Earth-mother. Their questions persist, and they want to know how Crake was born. Jimmy has to think of a simple story that eliminates any mother for Crake; making him essentially motherless reduces complications (at least he hopes). He says, "Crake was never born... He came down out of the sky, like thunder" (104). Mythologizing Crake is easier for Jimmy than the real story. He is the only source of information available to the Crakers, and the responsibility comes close to overwhelming him. His experience mirrors that of many a mother when he explains, he was dancing gracefully around the truth, light-footed, light-fingered. But it was almost too easy; they accepted, without question, everything he said. Much more of this—whole days, whole weeks of it—and he could see himself screaming with boredom. I could leave them behind, he

thought. Just leave them. Let them fend for themselves. They aren't my business. (350)

Here, Jimmy reveals how he has internalized the mothering he received when his first response under stress is to flee like his own mother did. Quickly, though (and perhaps remembering her last words to him on the execution video, "make me proud"), he realizes he cannot leave them. He knows he is all they have and they are all he has. His accounts of the stories he tells the Crakers make a great deal of sense to any parent who really has no idea what he/she is doing- we are just making it up as we go along. Adria Schwartz contends that modern motherhood has transcended gender; Jimmy's actions confirm that. Employing characters like Jimmy as mother figures, Atwood allows readers "to think of mothering in a far more complex and textured fashion, occurring as it does in a continuum of multiple subjectivities and relations" (Schwartz 254). At the end, readers get to see one positive, if imperfect, mother figure in Jimmy as he attempts to help the Crakers make meaning out of the confusing world.

Like *The Handmaid's Tale* before it, *Oryx and Crake* argues that any mother is better than an absent mother. Children need guidance and nurturing, even if their mothers feel overwhelmed or inadequate. One goal for Atwood here may be to encourage readers to pay attention to the smaller, everyday problems as well as the larger, worldwide events that affect their lives. Jimmy, Oryx, and Crake all suffer because their parents were victims of a society ruled by technology. Jimmy and Crake suffer because their mothers' work in pursuit of technological advancement supersedes their interest in their sons. Oryx suffers because poverty forces her mother to sell her to a man who uses her as entertainment for the technologically saturated wealthy class.

Technology, like the patriarchy of Gilead, fails to provide workable substitutes for mothers. All three main characters in *Oryx and Crake* fail to save one another, just as their mothers failed to save themselves and their children. Crake, especially, offers an extreme example of the tragedy that could result if mothers stop believing that the future might be better than the past and present. Overall, the novel does provide some hope. Hints that human society might heal include the destruction of the effigy the Crakers made of Jimmy (363) and Jimmy's surprise encounter with the other regular humans at the very end. Thus Jimmy is not the last man and optimism for the future remains. The ambiguous ending of *Oryx and Crake* opens the door for Atwood's next novel, *The Year of the Flood*. The two studied together warn readers about and offer possible solutions to the very imaginable possibilities lurking just around the bend.

CHAPTER IV. *THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD*

Atwood's third dystopian novel, *The Year of the Flood*, recounts many of the same events from *Oryx and Crake*. The two female main characters, Ren and Toby, survive Crake's engineered plague, and their stories fill in some details about what happens before, during, and after that event outside the secured corporations. From their vantage points in the so-called "pleeblands," Ren and Toby give accounts of their childhood experiences and their survival. Both characters lose their mothers at the hands of the corporations where Jimmy and Crake's parents worked. Unlike those boys, Ren and Toby grow up outside of the compounds for the most part. Their sides of the story intersect with their involvement in God's Gardeners, an environmental and religious group opposed to the corporate entities that have been ruling society, carelessly destroying the environment and experimenting with genetic modifications. God's Gardeners take a communal approach to childrearing; this method stands as a possible alternative way to adapt to changing times that still seems caring and effective.

Toby possibly voices Atwood's intent when she ponders her survival: "She ought to trust that she's here for a reason—to bear witness, to transmit a message, to salvage at least something from the general wreck" (95). Ironically, Toby's survival hinges on her lack of a family. The spa where she worked as a supply manager shut down after the pandemic struck and the other employees went "home to be with their families, believing love could save them" (17). The very little readers learn about Toby's life before she became involved with God's Gardeners includes details about her father's hunting lessons and her mother's mysterious illness and death. Reading *The Year of the Flood* in conjunction with *Oryx and Crake*, readers understand that Toby's mother

dies from unknowingly taking experimental supplements engineered by Crake's corporation. Her father commits suicide shortly thereafter, making Toby an orphan as a young adult. As she completes her education, Toby has no hopeful prospects. She donates eggs to help support herself, but an infection caused by that experience leaves her sterile. Lonely and until then unaware that she wanted to have children of her own, Toby "could feel all the light leaking out of her" (33). Her unconscious desire to be a mother reveals itself when the possibility of having a biological child is taken away. Her grief over her parents' deaths also surfaces at this point. Toby, like Offred and Jimmy in the previous novels, finds herself wistful for the chance to be with her mother again: "she longed desperately to be back there in the past—even the bad parts" (38). Her poverty leads her to a job that requires her to work in disgusting conditions. Not only must she prepare questionable food for a living, but she is also expected to submit to sexual abuse on a regular basis at the hands of her manager. Like Oryx, Toby hardens herself in order to survive, but her mothering instincts return when she flees that manager and joins the Gardeners.

Toby feels little inclination to buy into the religious messages preached by Adam One, the leader of God's Gardeners. She does, however, welcome the relative safety their commune provides. Perhaps unconsciously, Toby looks for a substitute mother after she joins God's Gardeners. Rich would say that this is typical for a woman who feels "unmothered" (242). Pilar, also known as Eve 6, becomes a mother figure in Toby's life at this time. She teaches Toby about beekeeping and natural remedies, as well as survival. Pilar also teaches Toby about the inner workings of the pharmaceutical corporations; she explains that Toby's mother's illness was an orchestrated occurrence

rather than an accident. Toby is surprised at the old woman's wisdom and worldly knowledge. Working alongside Pilar, Toby finds her calling as a healer. The downside of Toby's close relationship with Pilar is the double grief it soon causes. Toby's mother had only been dead for a few years when Pilar dies, and her death causes Toby to grieve all over again. Toby decides to take over Pilar's function in the hierarchy of God's Gardeners in order to honor Pilar's memory. Toby's new title as "Eve 6" refers both to the infrastructure of the commune and also to the original Eve, the Biblical mother of all humans. Toby becomes connected to all mothers when she becomes Eve 6. Atwood's use of the term "Eve" never resorts to the traditional trope of blaming women for all mankind's suffering, though. This marks God's Gardeners as distinct from Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Throughout the course of the novel, readers see several instances when Toby takes on maternal roles. The first occurs when she teaches the God's Gardeners children about plants in their informal school. She scolds them like a teacher, but also like a mother. She gives one of the boys an important errand and tells him, "We're depending on you" because she believes "it was good to let boys that age believe they were doing the jobs of men, so long as they didn't get carried away" (175). Even though she cannot bear children of her own, she finds rewarding opportunities through teaching. She has a special knack for understanding the children, as she reveals when she thinks about an incident involving two of the girls who have a falling out: "They think we don't know what they're up to. Their snobberies, their cruelties, their schemes" (177). Simply paying attention to the children sets Toby apart as an exemplary mother

in these novels; so many of the children (Offred, Jimmy, and Crake, especially) are largely ignored by the adults charged with their care.

Toby also works as a “minder” to a refugee from a corporation compound who comes to the Gardener’s commune for protection. This woman is known only as “Hammerhead” because of the damage she said she inflicted upon her husband’s computer before she left him back in the compound. These clues logically add up to identifying Hammerhead as Jimmy’s mother from *Oryx and Crake*. Toby finds her charge difficult and self-absorbed, but she assists the woman by providing her with a hiding place, a disguise, and a calming medicine. Though the refugee was probably close to Toby’s own age, these actions place Toby in the role of the mother. She sees to it that the woman is safe and protected. Toby also displays motherly protective instincts when she defends the Gardeners against violent intruders. Lastly, when she has had to assume a new identity, she recognizes Ren at the spa after Ren’s mother has cut ties with her. Toby risks her own safety by allowing Ren to hide at the spa. The two women relate like a mother and daughter; they also commiserate about feeling “like an orphan” (298).

Toby’s instincts serve her well after the “Waterless Flood” decimates life on Earth. When she discovers Ren injured outside her door, she nurses her. Toby feels reluctant to help at first, which is understandable because Ren is in such bad shape, Toby’s supplies are limited, and the experience of surviving at all has been exhausting. Toby comes around quickly, though, and thinks “she’d like to cure her, cherish her, for isn’t it miraculous that Ren is here? That she’s come through the Waterless Flood with only minor damage?” (360). These sentiments echo the thoughts of many mothers who

overcome feeling overwhelmed because their pregnancies were unplanned, their children have special needs, or motherhood simply does not turn out to be what they expected. Toby also fits the role of “good mother” when she and Ren encounter the body of one of the other Gardener children. Toby hides her own pain in order to keep the two of them moving, a necessity for survival. In this instance she seems much like Offred fleeing the country with her daughter in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toby, whom the Gardener children used to describe as dry and cold, holds Ren's hand as they run. Later in their journey, Toby's thoughts are similar to Jimmy's when he attempts to mother the Crakers in *Oryx and Crake*: “Do I look reassuring? she wonders. Calm and in control? Do I look as if I know what the hell I'm doing?” (415). Again, like Jimmy, Toby has to fake it to fulfill her purpose. Her questions are the same questions most every mother asks in times of crisis. Pretending to be what their children need them to be sometimes turns them into just that.

Ren begins her life much like Jimmy, in the compounds, and the only child in a traditional nuclear family. That changes when her mother, Lucerne, engages in an affair and leaves their gated compound community for the outlying “pleeblands” to be with her lover. Though Lucerne takes Ren with her, Ren essentially becomes motherless at this point. Lucerne's main concern revolves around her new love interest, Zeb. Ren resents her mother uprooting and neglecting her, but soon finds solidarity among the other orphaned children (Shackie, Croze, Oates, and Amanda) who populate the God's Gardeners' commune. Ren's first friend, Bernice, is not an orphan, but she suffers because her mother is comatose and her father is a sexual predator. These children take care of one another and participate in their expected roles as God's Gardeners.

Though they often mock the group's teachings, the structure offers security that none of them had elsewhere. Ren and her friends are most vulnerable when they venture out on errands to do their chores, but they protect each other and learn how to survive.

These are skills that a mother would normally supply, as Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* generalizes: "mothers think out strategies of protection, nurturance, and training" (23).

Lucerne leaves Ren to fend for herself, while the other children take on those roles.

Ren's mother Lucerne especially fits the category of "bad mother" because she was physically present, but paid no attention to her daughter. Ren finds more security among the orphans than with Lucerne. Ren's bonds with her friends get severed when Lucerne abruptly decides to move back to the compound to live with Ren's father once again. Lucerne's unpredictable actions divide her from her daughter almost completely, even when they live together. Lucerne ignores Ren largely, but uses her as a convenient excuse when it serves her well as an explanation for why she left the compound. Lucerne tells the security officers that they were kidnapped in order to hide her affair. Ren explains that Lucerne's "story was that I'd been traumatized by being stuck in among the warped, brainwashing cult fold. I had no way of proving her wrong. Anyway maybe I had been traumatized: I had nothing to compare myself with" (213). Lucerne's selfish desires motivate her more than anything else, and her insistence that Ren act "crazier and more disturbed" borders on abuse. After their move back to the compound goes sour, Lucerne marries another man and refuses to pay for Ren's education. Ren realizes she has lost all motherly support when she states, "I was out of the nest in one swift kick. Not that I was ever in much of a nest: I'd always been on the edge of the ledge with Lucerne" (294). The final straw occurs when Lucerne visits the

spa where Toby helps Ren hide out. Ren notes her mother's lack of interest as she recounts the incident: "I think she recognized me, but she blew me off like I was a piece of lint... it was like being erased off the slate of the universe—to have your own mother act as if you'd never been born" (301).

Prematurely on her own, Ren takes a position in a strip club where she luckily escapes the "Waterless Flood" predicted by the Gardeners and enacted by Crake. After the pandemic, Ren echoes Offred, Jimmy, and Toby when she expresses her nostalgia for the commune: "It was sad to be back in the place where we'd been children: even if we hadn't liked it all the time, I felt so homesick for it now" (340). Her statement shows how the commune, imperfect as it was, offered nurturing like a mother. It makes a clear connection between the support and care a stable home can provide. Ren also learns that Lucerne has likely died; her response shows her love for her mother endures: "I'm sorry to hear that... and despite how she acted later, she was my mother once, and I used to love her" (398).

Ren and Toby's relationships with their mothers and mother figures in *The Year of the Flood* provide insight into more damaged bonds. Toby lost her mother when she was young; Ren's mother was physically present, but not nurturing or loving. Both characters' mothers suffered at the hands of the corporations and both girls find solace and nurturing when they join God's Gardeners. Toby reluctantly fills the role of her own mother figure Pilar after Pilar's death. Ren finds a sister in her friend Amanda, and later Toby cares for Ren in a motherly way. These women survive the pandemic with a combination of their adaptation skills and good luck. They reconnect after the plague in a way that reconstructs the community they both left, showing that the God's Gardener

model of society had valuable components. Meeting up with other former Gardeners and Jimmy, Toby and Ren seem to begin a new family that will include them and the Crakers. This family will have varied models of motherhood that will place less importance on gender by including Jimmy as a mother figure. The new models they have used to help themselves survive will also guide them as they care for one another and any future children that will be born into the post-flood world.

The Year of the Flood's certainly reinforces Atwood's statements about hope for human cooperation. The mothers and mother figures in this novel represent a wide spectrum of experiences. From negligent and selfish Lucerne to nurturing and brave Toby, the range of experiences the characters share show that children long for a protective maternal influence. Additionally, the survivors exhibit forgiveness, a trait that connects them to Offred from *The Handmaid's Tale* and Jimmy from *Oryx and Crake*. Forgiveness and peace are traits traditionally associated with mothers. Hope for a peaceful, cooperative new era satisfactorily resolves all three of these novels.

CHAPTER VII. CONCLUSION

Reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* in 2011 heightens my awareness of many issues, including political extremism, environmental destruction, and most importantly, mother-child relationships. Those relationships suffer at the hands of the other issues, proving that the problems related to mothers and children result from forces beyond their control. The enduring impact of these novels lies in knowing that the disasters are survivable, and that there are many models to choose from when forming human relationships. The possibility of integrating some new technology with old modes of human interaction opens up as well. The patriarchal, religion-based system depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* closely represents past standards that have devalued women and blamed them for all the problems and failures of their offspring. Likewise, the technology-obsessed future world of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* values children only as consumers and eventual participants in the quest for advancement. Love, nurturing, guidance, and attention for children are largely absent in these frighteningly realistic settings. Both systems fail to provide what children need, but all hope is not lost for the next generation.

A glance at news website *Salon.com* as I write this conclusion offers proof of just how close the novels' worlds are to our own. Stories on the topics of wars, natural disasters, corporate mergers, the latest in microcomputer gadgets, and the 2012 U.S. presidential election dominate the headlines. All of these ideas factor prominently in Atwood's three dystopian novels. News about mothers and children is somewhat buried; on March 21, 2011, the only "big" story I have found is about updated safety recommendations for children's car seats. I had to dig deeper, into the *New York Times*,

to find an article apparently blaming an 11-year-old girl and her mother for the girl's brutal gang rape. A recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* also points the finger of blame at mothers for allowing their daughters to "dress like prostitutes." These stories provide a very small sampling of the kinds of thinking that go on regarding mothers in the present day, but they raise troubling concerns. Either mothers are absent from what is considered important enough to make news, or they are blamed for crimes perpetuated by men. Clearly, mothers have a long way to go toward achieving respect and validation.

All three of these novels assert that imperfect mothers are preferable to no mother at all and that devaluation of mothers, children, and mother-child relationships causes immense suffering. Atwood does not stop at merely illuminating the problems, though. Her books also offer alternative models to the nuclear family structure that once was synonymous with motherhood. One of the major themes that materializes in each work is the realization that the fictional worlds were dystopian before more dramatic shifts took place. Maternal bonds were tenuous in the past time of each book, and they come close to being broken completely by the powers that take over society. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, those powers are closely linked to misogynist, patriarchal rulers, and in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, those powers are connected to pursuit of technological advancement at all costs. In each case, children and mothers are devalued, commodified, and dehumanized.

These three novels might scare readers, but they also offer hope for the present time. We are not doomed if we follow some of the implicit recommendations Margaret Atwood provides, including expanding the definition of motherhood to include men,

helping caregivers achieve balance between domestic and public life, and encouraging maternal bonding that lasts throughout a child's lifetime. This work can be done by individuals, but it can also be successfully accomplished by supportive groups. These new mothers can begin new traditions that help children by responding to them, while at the same time attending to other roles. In this way, the failure of the old patriarchal system and the new technologically competitive systems will be exposed. Then new generations may discover better solutions to the problems in their worlds.

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