

# THE ANTHROPOCENE AND CLI-FICTION IN ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND *MADDADDAM*

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**Abstract:** *The relationship between human beings and their environment has always been mediated by narratives trying to make sense of and represent the world, such as classical Greek myth, religion, and existentialism (Thacker 2011, 11). However, these anthropocentric approaches seem to be useless before the Anthropocene era and the possibility of a world without us. Ecocriticism, originated in the 1960s, was the first in adopting deep ecologist rhetoric which favored narratives on “wilderness experiences, or apocalyptic threats” (Garrard 2004, 176), intended to promote ‘right’ environmental actions. Yet, environmentalism has been strongly politicized and negatively stereotyped as fanaticism imposing an essential way of life. Even eco-conscious millennials do not share and even reject the old deep ecology precepts. Since the Anthropocene is born intrinsically intertwined with the threat of the Apocalypse, it becomes the subject matter for literary dystopias depicting nightmarish futures. Moreover, the awareness and questioning of human behavior and responsibility in the progressive change in our climate is the origin and source of a new, more specific literary trend: climate change fiction, also known as Cli-fi, to be found mainly within the dystopian genre, in which the personal and the political give way to the global. This paper intends to assess this movement from the depiction of a “phenomenon that requires individuals’ engagement” (Johns-Putra 2016, 269) to a depiction of its global external effects and the fighting for survival, through the case study of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *Maddaddam* (2013).*

**Key Words:** *Anthropocene; Dystopias; Cli-fiction; Apocalypse Narrative*

In the year 2000, Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen claimed that our contemporary bio-genetic age should be named the Anthropocene because “human activity has so altered the history of the Earth that it has become necessary to declare a new epoch to signify this impact” (Trexler 2015, 2). With the change of millennium, the Anthropocene era is starting to be recognized in all cultural fields. This irreversible degeneration of the Earth system generates “an undeniable sense of tragedy, urgency, or perhaps more often: panic [. . .] [and] anthropobia” (Robbins and Moore 2012, 8), that is, fear of people, or more specifically, fear of human actions in relation to the environment. The Anthropocene has not been officially accepted by the scientific community yet, but it further energizes the debate about the possibility of human extinction. Thus, living in the Anthropocene era would imply a threat to human survival. This peril has become the departing point and subject matter for an extraordinary cultural activity engaging the humanities.

The Anthropocene is intrinsically linked to the threat of the Apocalypse, because the impact made on nature by human actions could cause the end of life as we have known it. But even if there is general agreement about the fact that human activity has indeed damaged the biosphere, there is some controversy about the term itself – Anthropocene – and about whether it should be considered a new geological era or simply a frontier marking the change between the Holocene and the following unnamed epoch (Haraway 2015, 160; Dillon 2018, n.p.). The Anthropocene would be “a boundary event” marking the transition from a period “when refugia, places of refuge still existed” (Haraway 2015, 160). A great deal of criticism against the use of the term derives from the central role that the word *Anthro*, that is *Human being*, still plays in its root. The name ‘Anthropocene’ is still openly accused of overemphasizing the centrality of human beings. By means of naming this period after *Anthropos*, human beings retain a pre-eminent position in relation to nature and non-humans. Haraway acknowledges the need for more than one name to encapsulate the ingredients that have contributed to and determined the Anthropocene. There are other proposals such as Plantationocene – collectively coined by a group of anthropologists in the year 2014 – and Capitalocene, coined by Andreas

Malm and Jason Moore (Haraway 2015, 160). Clive Hamilton suggests the use of a different term: “the Technocene” (2016, 103), which refers to the effect that human technology has had upon organic and non-organic life. Finally, Haraway proposes a new name, “The Chthulucene,” that would summarize “past, present, and to come” (Haraway 2015, 161). In the Anthropocene human actions are appreciable through the study of geological layers. They are the visible consequence, imprinted on the face of the earth itself and deeper still, on our past and evolution: our technological, biological and social development. Therefore, temporality and temporal scope are inextricably entangled in the concept of the Anthropocene.

The relationship between human beings and their environment has always been mediated by narratives trying to make sense and represent the world. Western culture has traditionally relied on ‘interpretive frameworks’ that subsist in our contemporary age under different forms: classical Greek Myth appears now transformed and as part of the narratives of “computer generated films”, religion is “diffused into political ideology, and the fanaticism of religious consumerism” and existentialism has been “repurposed into self-help and the therapeutics of consumerism” (Thacker 2011, 6). However, the frightening possibility, brought about by the Anthropocene, of a “world-without-us” (Thacker 2011, 9) makes these classical human-centered approaches no longer adequate. Borrowing Jonhs-Putra’s words, the Anthropocene “has engendered an existentialist crisis and radically altered human ontology and epistemology, that is, our ways of being and knowing” (Jonhs-Putra 2016, 270).

The undermining of anthropocentric philosophical approaches and the concerns for the responsibility of human actions upon the Earth were already at the core of environmentalism, which emerged long before the general consciousness of living in the Anthropocene era. Environmental concerns started to be widely disseminated already in the 1960s with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), generally considered the beginning of modern environmentalism (Garrard 2004, 1). These first environmental worries trigger the birth of ecocriticism as an “avowedly political mode of analysis” (Garrard 2004, 3) that studies “the relationship of the human and the non-

human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself” (Garrard 2004, 5). Garrard in his theoretical proposal distinguishes between ‘Environmentalism’ – a political-pragmatic position – and ‘Deep Ecology’ that is a philosophical-spiritual position. Whereas Environmentalists are concerned about environmental issues, their priority still being the maintenance and improvement of Western standards of living, deep ecologists defend more ‘Arcadian’ – as more simple, rural and preindustrial – views that involve de-urbanization, long-term population reduction and low-technology measures. Ecocriticism, both explicitly and implicitly, largely relies on deep ecologist rhetoric. Glenn Love, focusing on literary criticism, argues for the necessity of ecocriticism as the unavoidable approach for the analysis of literary works, because our environment will always be part of “the interpretative context” (2003, 16). In other words, he makes claims about the decentering of human consciousness and social conflicts as the unique subjects of literary criticism, as well as the need to reexamine and reinterpret canonical works of the past through the lens of ecocriticism to achieve a ‘biological and evolutionary’ understanding of human nature and behavior.

If the geological era of the Anthropocene shows on its layers the unintended result of human biological, technological, social and economic evolution, cultural evolution cannot be separated from the equation. As Love claims, “humans affect and interpret – “construct – our earthly environment, inevitably mediating to some degree – culturally and textually – between ourselves and the world” (Love 2003, 26). The Anthropocene is also a metaphor about humans as a destructive geological form. It is culturally constructed as well as materially determined, and affects in turn all cultural constructions. Fiction and non-fiction narratives aim to portray the Anthropocene, although fiction seems to be more effective than non-fiction in raising readers’ level of knowledge, empathy and emotional response (Von Mossner 2016, 85-86). Furthermore, fictions concerning the Anthropocene are usually focused on individual protagonists and their limited lifespan, that is, they are, in general, conventional apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives.

Climate fiction, or Cli-fi, emerges at the crossroads of science fiction, post-apocalyptic narratives and dystopias. Cli-fi is for some

critics a new genre by its own right (see Tuhus-Dubrow 2013), while others like Trexler (2015) or Johns-Putra define climate change fiction not necessarily as a genre but as “fiction concerned with anthropogenic climate change or global warming” (2016, 267). Cli-fi novels are an attempt to make sense of human collective anxiety around climate change, and to force us to react and to break down some of the presumable state of solastalgia<sup>1</sup> produced by the Anthropocene. The core issue is common in all these stories and is the key concept in the Anthropocene: that human behavior has affected the Earth, and consequently its climate, to a point of no return. In the large majority of cases, these novels are set in the future, but some of them locate their narrative times closer to the contemporary period. Johns-Putra points out how in the novels located closer to our contemporary time, climate change “is a phenomenon that requires individuals’ engagement as a political, ethical, or even psychological problem” (Johns-Putra 2016, 269), whereas those novels set in the most distant future and/or postapocalyptic scenarios depict climate change “as part of an overall collapse including technological over-reliance, economic instability, and increased social division” (Johns-Putra 2016:269). That is, the focus and emphasis in the present moves from the most personal and internal to the physical consequences, the collective and the global in the future, a movement that can be inferred from the different scenarios displayed in Margaret Atwood’s dystopic novels *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *MaddAddam*.

Initially, *The Handmaid’s Tale* was widely labelled and understood as a “feminist dystopia” (Malik 1987, 11). But it was shortly after its first publication that the novel spurred great controversy in its portrayal of feminism. Mary McCarthy claimed that the novel partially blamed “excessive feminism” for the creation of Gilead (McCarthy 1986, n.p.). Gayle Greene, in the same line, not only problematizes the novel’s feminism, but also emphasizes that feminism “is too a target of Atwood’s satire” (Greene 1986, 14). But beyond its controversial feminism, Coral A. Howells, without denying the novel’s feminist motifs, understands *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Solastalgia is a term coined by the Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht to define “a form of psychic or existential distress caused by environmental change” (in Macfarlane 2016: n.p.). Solastalgia is related to a “modern uncanny” in which the familiar place is now not recognizable because of the transformation made by climate changes

*Handmaid's Tale* as a warning against 20<sup>th</sup> century Western technological society told from a woman's point of view. One of the main reasons that trigger the birth of the fictional Republic of Gilead is the high rate of infertility caused by environmental changes, which are themselves mostly the consequence of the increasing human involvement with science and technology and the way it affects human bodies. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel that explores possible public, natural, behavioral, emotional, physiological, and political responses to a new environment transformed by human actions; this is why I consider the term "proto-cli-fiction" (Hageman 2014, n.p.) to be apt for *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel can also be seen as a precursor of Atwood's subsequent dystopias more openly centered on the climate change issue, such as *MaddAddam* (2013). *The Handmaid* presents a future in which all the social movements born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are destroyed in a near and nightmarish future. If Rebeca Mead calls Margaret Atwood "the Prophet of Dystopia" (Mead 2017, n.p.), it would be equally suitable to call her 'the prophet of cli-fi' since she tackles in her novel the issues of changes in nature and climate as forces powerful enough to bring about the end of Western society as we know it.

When *The Handmaid* was published in 1985, "acid rain was corroding the forest and rivers" (Morrison 2017, n.p.), but the American population in general was not especially attentive to the situation. The Republic of Gilead in the novel is a theocratic society in which religious extremists are in power because most of the population in the former US is infertile. The origin of this extended epidemic of infertility is not explained at the beginning of the novel. In a story in which the information is fragmentally provided, the explanation is deferred to the second half of the book, when Offred recalls the indoctrination in the Red Centre:

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. Maybe a vulture would die of eating you. Maybe you light up in the dark, like an old-fashioned watch. . . Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault, nobody's fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mold could touch. (Atwood 1996, 122)

The quotation above, told in the past tense, resembles a kind of ironic creation myth, the mythical tale of the birth of the Republic of Gilead, born because of human folly. In *The Handmaid* human behavior is blamed for the poisoning and physical deterioration of the people. As Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow rightly recalls, this tale in which the human race is annihilated for their sins has a long-term tradition within human narratives and ancient myths of total destruction such as Noah's as a biblical example. But in *The Handmaid*, God or the gods are not agents of destruction. And even though infertility and human degeneration in the novel are presented as a direct result of human folly, the Sons of Jacob, the creators of the Republic of Gilead take God's place to build their ideal society according to their distorted interpretation of natural rules. As the Commander explains to Offred: "Those years were just an anomaly, historically speaking ... All we've done is return things to Nature's norm" (Atwood 1996, 232). He refers to the shift of values American society had achieved in the 1960s–70s with the acceptance and inclusion of all marginalized minorities.

In spite of being aware of the consequences that pollution and environmental deterioration have had for human beings, Offred – *The Handmaid's* main character and focalizer – seems to represent the average citizen's reaction in the face of environmental degradation, climate change and animal extinction. Her reaction consists of either incredulity or acceptance and passivity. Offred still does not quite believe that many natural species have disappeared: "I remember haddock, swordfish, scallops, tuna, lobsters ... salmon, pink and fat, grilled in steaks. Could they all be extinct, like the whales? I've heard that *rumour*" (Atwood 1993, 173, emphasis added). Offred's personal situation is a direct consequence of the nature/human degradation. She has been reduced to being only a body, commodified and deprived of any right, affect, identity, and power of decision because of the fact that her fertility is a symptom that she is apparently unaffected by pollution and environmental degradation. Climate change has transformed her into a valuable good. Atwood, as a cli-fiction prophet, anticipates and presents to the reader the dangers of environmental degradation that were already becoming pervasive and compromised the survival of life on Earth.

Furthermore, as Shannon Hengen explains, environmental concerns in Atwood's works are related to keeping the balance in the preservation of humans' place "in a natural world in which the term 'human' does not imply 'superior', or 'alone'" (Hengen 2006, 74). Atwood's deep awareness about the dangers of human intervention in nature remains visible until the last pages of the novel. In the "Historical Notes" chapter that closes the book, the group of scholars analyzing Gilead's society from a fictional future perspective give the most comprehensive and detailed account of the 1980s environmental threats:

The age of the R-strain syphilis and also the infamous AIDS epidemic... Still-births, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage... leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic waste disposal sites... uncontrolled uses of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays. (1996, 316–317)

This eventual reminder of the direct relationship between the creation of the totalitarian Gilead, on the one hand, and human self-destruction and destruction of the planet, on the other, clearly demonstrates Atwood's intention of getting the message across. Religious extremism, extreme political conservatism, and the backlash against the rights of women and any marginal group are triggered by and rapidly spread across an environment that is ruined. Environmental issues are thus a steady presence in the novel. But in *The Handmaid's Tale* we see the effects of this degradation of nature on a personal level. Offred gives us her subjective point of view as a woman, a member of one of the minorities that are not within the Gilead regime. We are witnesses of Offred's mental and emotional drama as she tries to adapt herself to surviving her imprisonment.

*MaddAddam*, published in 2013, is the volume that brings an end to the trilogy. *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is the first novel of the trilogy and introduces a post-apocalyptic scenario. Crake – a mad scientist – has taken God's place to inflict a terrible punishment on all humanity. He has created a pandemic – the so-called Waterless Flood – that almost annihilates the whole human race. Before the apocalypse the world was



divided into the Compounds – inhabited by the scientific elite, protected and isolated from climate change – and the pleeblands – where the less privileged majority of society fought for survival, living in crowded slums under the rule of savage capitalism, with no respect for civil, social or human rights. In *The Year of the Flood* (2009), the second novel of the trilogy, the same chronological period is now presented from the perspective of two other survivors, both of them women: Ren and Toby. The main thread in the story follows God’s Gardeners, a deep ecologist religion that rebels against the rule of the Compounders. *Oryx* and *The Year* come together at about the same point in time, and *MaddAddam* continues on from that. The Earth is still ravaged by an inhospitable and harsh climate after the pandemic. Sharon R. Wilson, in her critique, exposes intertextual references with flood myths, legends and fairy tales which question “whether or not people really are at the center of the universe” (Wilson 2013, 334). *MaddAddam* displays environmental damage, the relationship among time, nature, myths, history and identity, but as Michele Roberts affirms: “this dystopian journey through a wasteland of high science and low deeds ends in hope” (2013, n.p.). *MaddAddam*’s ending is not an Apocalypse but a Genesis, the beginning of a new race and society, respectful and in symbiosis with nature, in which there is room for other kinds of beings apart from humans.

In *MaddAddam*, there are still a few humans on the Earth trying to survive together with the Crakers, a new race artificially created in a laboratory to take over the human race. *MaddAddam*’s setting is the whole world, the effects are global. Crake considers his fellow human beings guilty of “the biosphere being depleted and the temperature skyrocketing” (Atwood 2013, 140). In contrast with *the Handmaid’s Tale*, *MaddAddam* emphasizes the physical drama, the difficulty of survival and the intergenerational obligation. The older generation, represented by Toby – human woman and main narrator/focalizer in the novel – makes its priority the survival and security of the younger, both humans and Crakers, and their miscegenated offspring. This movement from the personal/psychological suffering in *The Handmaid’s Tale* to the issue of survival in an apocalyptic scenario in *MaddAddam* is a characteristic trait of cli-fi novels set in the most distant future, that is, it would fit into

Johns-Putra's second category of cli-fi novels, in which the focus is on the physical consequences, the collective and the global in the future.

Survivors in *MaddAddam* respect nature on the premises of deep ecology. Humans are forced to live primitively without technology in the postapocalyptic time. Toby teaches the youngest human survivors how to get food and cure the sick, still following, as far as possible, the God Gardeners' ecologist precepts. The Crakers, although artificially born, were designed to live in close contact with nature in an Earth now inhospitable to human beings. The Crakers do not need proteins; their skins are insect-repellent and resistant to the burning sun and freezing nights. Moreover, they "eat leaves ... so they'd never need agriculture" (Atwood 2013, 19). Crakers and humans could peacefully live together after Crake "got rid of the chaos and the hurtful people," (4) but the survival of some painballers – violent convicts dehumanized to a reptilian level – "set human malice loose in the world again," (9) and compromise Crakers' safety. The Crakers are unable to resort to violent actions and are thus powerless in the face of the painballers.

The only way to avoid extinction in *MaddAddam* is through the collaboration among all kinds of creatures: humans, Crakers and new bioengineered growth animals like the intelligent pigoons – pigs with human cortex in their brains. The alliance between humans and pigoons emerged victorious in the confrontation with the dehumanized killers: "The two-skinned ones [humans] and the Pig Ones [pigoons] cleared away the bad men, just as Crake cleared away the people in the chaos to make a good and safe place for us to live" (Atwood 2013, 358). Human beings are confronted with the need to 'make kin' with other creatures. Furthermore, there are four fertile human women and three of them have miscegenated offspring, Crakers' babies. All babies are born with "the green eyes of the Crakers" (Atwood 2013, 379). Environmental degradation plus an excessive reliance on technology has led to a world in which technology does not exist anymore, and where the fittest for survival are those who do not need technological prosthetics or helps: the Crakers. They could represent an ideal race on deep ecologist premises that propose the return to a pretechnological way of living.

In sum, *The Handmaid's Tale* as a proto cli-fi novel, in my opinion, illustrates the consequences of climate change at individual level. We

witness Offred's psychological and emotional drama in a novel more openly centered on social power issues. Extended infertility caused by environmental degradation is used as justification to institutionalize the figure of the handmaid, but human extinction does not seem to pose an immediate threat. On the other hand, *MaddAddam*, written 30 years after the *Handmaid's Tale*, describes the Earth inhabitants' way of living in the time before and after the Anthropocene, a border stage. What we have is a movement towards an overall collapse, in which emotional dramas lose their importance in the face of the impossibility of the survival of the 'pure' human race, in which the responsibility of one generation over the next is crucial as well as the association and collaboration of all kinds of creatures. In order to find a path to survive the Anthropocene the novel presents an eventually non-anthropocentric chance: miscegenation. The offspring of the surviving human beings need the Crakers' non-invasive and adaptable condition to natural resources and harsh climate, and a non-violent coexistence with the Pigeons – intelligent as humans but physically stronger and powerful – if they want to survive. In sum, *MaddAddam* as a transparently cli-fiction product, has an explicit purpose to warn and remind us, the readers, that our destructive actions against nature have consequences. Maybe our time as the dominant form of life on Earth is inevitably coming to an end, if we do not change our way of living. The novel is metaphorically a book of Genesis, a new beginning for the Crakers but it is also our human Apocalypse, our predicted end.

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