**Nihilism and Myths in Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood***

Mihaela Prioteasa[[1]](#footnote-2)

**Abstract**: Margaret Atwood’s 2009 novel situated on the borderline between myth and “the abyss,” betrays the author’s predisposition for creating post-apocalyptic hyperboles of our present, without ever falling into pure dystopia. The author’s quasi-mythical envisioning exposes her imagined world stripped of both economic base and meaning. This does not necessarily mean apocalyptic annihilation or the end of the world but simultaneous plurality and the projection of our globalized present into humanity’s self-perpetuating process of the given and the desired. The paper intends to identify some important signifiers in *The Year of the Flood* that establish it as a work of nihilistic/mythical conception.

**Key-words**: nihilism, myth, dystopia, apocalypse.

Margaret Atwood’s speculative fiction has often been praised for its complex depiction of social, political, national, and environmental issues but its separation of the fictional *mise-en-scène* from the contemporary real world is the element that defines her futurist, dystopian novels. Her fiction uses already existing facts and makes an imaginative leap into the future, changing them through a fast developing narrative full of genre-crossing and multilayered writing and transforming current sociocultural, political, or scientific realities into potentially devastating situations. Atwood herself defines her writings as exploring “the consequences of new and proposed technologies in graphic ways by showing them as fully operational,” which is something that “‘novels’ as usually defined cannot do.” (Atwood, 2012: 62)

Atwoodian nihilistic novels order time, for both reader and protagonist, concerning the break point of apocalypse: “pre-” and “post-” being the main markers of temporality that give sense to the temporal distance and “the temporal disruption that has come to be understood as a hallmark of traumatized consciousness” (Snyder, 2011: 472). Contemporary trauma theorists concluded that temporal delay is both a manner of coping with the event and a sign of the still existing traumatic feelings, the trauma being “not experienced as a mere repression or defense, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment. The trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site” (Caruth, 1995:10). The resemblance between dystopian speculative fiction and trauma theory reveals that they both cross the limit of reality and fantasy: “The future as imagined in dystopian speculative fiction must be simultaneously recognizable and unrecognizable, both like and not-like the present. In order to grasp the caution offered by the tale, we must see the imagined future in our actual present and also recognize the difference between now and the future as-imagined. Thus, the reader of such fiction must sustain a kind of double consciousness with respect both to the fictionality of the world portrayed and to its potential as our own world’s future” (Snyder, 2011:470). The post-apocalyptic futurist Atwoodian scenarios that cross the blurry line between the real and the imagined produce a contradictory sense “of self-recognition and non-recognition, of identification and dis-identification with the portrayed subjects of unspeakable loss.” (Snyder, 2011: 473)

A sequel to her earlier volume *Oryx and Crake*,Margaret Atwood’s *The Year* *of the Flood* follows the existence of two women and their interaction and involvement within a religious movement – an odd group of people called the God’s Gardeners – that combines different apocalyptic, Christian and environmental elements. Whereas Ren was a member of the Gardener’s community since she was a young girl, Toby skeptically adhered to the group when she was offered shelter by their leader, Adam One, as a consequence of her being sexually assaulted by her employer. Along the years she climbed to the position of Eve Six in the Gardeners’ governing hierarchy, despite her reluctance to their beliefs. Ren is however removed from the community at her parents’ separation and is forced to adapt to the “external world,” ending up working as an exotic dancer. In the aftermath of the plague, or the cataclysmic “Waterless Flood,” as it is called by the Gardeners, the two girls meet again when they realize they are among the flood’s few survivors.

In Atwood’s imagined sect, religious and scientific elements combine with the sole purpose of harmonizing faith; the Fall of Man is presented as part of the evolutionary process: “The ancestral primates fell out of the trees; then they fell from vegetarianism into meat-eating. Then employees live lives of affluence while a majority of the populace contends with violence and scarcity in the “pleeblands.” (Atwood, 2009: 36)

The new world is inhabited by the God’s Gardeners, a nonviolent resistance group – that grows organic vegetable gardens on rooftops, encourages vegetarianism and withdrawal from the doomed capitalistic society that surrounds them – and also by strange creatures: the pigoon (a genetically modified animal that grows copies of transplantable human organs) and the ChickieNob, a headless, legless, featherless organism that grows chicken breasts and drumsticks for a fast food franchise.

Their new belief tries to intertwine faith and science putting an accent on the idea that everything on earth is God’s creation, and therefore sacred and should not be disturbed but cherished: “The Human Words of God [i.e., the Bible] speak of the Creation in terms that could be understood by the men of old. There is no talk of galaxies or genes, for such terms would have confused them greatly! But must we therefore take as scientific fact the story that the world was created in six days, thus making a nonsense of observable data? God cannot be held to the narrowness of literal and materialistic interpretations, nor measured by Human measurements, for His days are eons, and a thousand ages of our time are like an evening to Him. Unlike some other religions, we have never felt it served a higher purpose to lie to children about geology.”(Atwood, 2009: 10)

The majority of the Gardeners’ doctrines are rooted in science, showing at the same time a basic misunderstanding of technology and a contradiction in its interpretation – when Ren finds a camera phone and brings it into the compound the Eves warn her about its destructive powers but do not find any harm in keeping a laptop computer of their own: “Likewise, their evolutionary paradigm seems to fuel conflicting views of the cosmos, lurching between a rhapsodic panentheism (or at least a very deep sacramentality) and an ascetic dualism: one moment the earth is resplendent with signs of God’s majesty and beauty, and the next it is a ‘world of useless illusion’ to which one should not be ‘attached’” (Atwood, 2009: 225). Atwood insists in the belief that this mix of ideas could work and help them function as a society: their children take classes not in biology or theology but in survival skills (“Fabric Recycling,” “Culinary Arts,” “Sewing,” “Mental Arithmetic,” “Bees and Mycology,” “Holistic Healing with Plant Remedies,” “Wild and Garden Botanicals,” “Meditation,” “Predator-Prey Relationships and Animal Camouflage,” “Emergency Medical,” “The Human Reproductive System” – Atwood, 2009: 61) and are made to memorize the information fearing that paper may not be available after the Waterless Flood.

The ever-present narrative of the Waterless Flood provides the author with the additional layers of meaning, enabling the Gardeners to resist environmental exterior forces and preserve their sense of social cohesion: “The Gardeners were like that,” Ren recalls, “they’d tell you to do something and then prohibit the easiest way to do it” (Atwood, 2009: 68). The idea of revengeful superior being that sends over a catastrophe is more a strategy for Adam One than a belief: “There’s a penalty without God in the story too, needless to say. But people are less likely to credit that. If there’s a penalty, they want a penalizer. They dislike senseless catastrophe.” (Atwood, 2009: 241)

In front of the Waterless Flood Atwood’s Gardeners have a real advantage of survival not necessarily because of their developed skills but because of the religious context: *The God’s Gardeners Oral* *Hymnbook*,adapted from Dickinson and Blake’s poems, is the main Atwoodian tool for the synthesis of the religious, scientific, and ethical aspects of their belief system. Some are moralistic in tone:

Oh let me not be proud, dear Lord, / Nor rank myself above / The other Primates, through whose genes / We grew into your love / A million million years, Your Days, / Your methods past discerning, / Yet through Your blend of DNAs / Came passion, mind, and learning. / We cannot always trace Your path / Through Monkey and Gorilla, / Yet all are sheltered underneath / Your Heavenly Umbrella. (Atwood, 2009: 54)

 Oh Garden, oh my Garden, / I’ll mourn forevermore / Until the Gardeners arise, / And you to Life restore. (Atwood, 2009: 1)

Still, others reinforce the Gardeners’ sense of their place in the cosmos – But we are not as Animals – / We cherish other Creatures’ lives; / And so we do not eat their flesh / Unless dread Famine drives” (Atwood, 2009: 348) ­ – since the difference between success and failure in the Atwoodian post-apocalyptic world stands precisely in the extent to which one possesses the ability to adapt.

Margaret Atwood’s texts evince a condemnation of the same tendencies in religion: male supremacy over females; even if at a first glance there is a well-functioning egalitarian parliament of Adams and Eves, and “all the Gardeners [are] equal on the spiritual level” (Atwood, 2009: 45), for Adam One there is no corresponding Eve and he accords to himself certain advantages: considering it is all right to lie “for the greater good” (Atwood, 2009: 184), for instance.

Atwood seems to view religion optimistically to the point that it delayed this process of calcification. In *On the Origin of Stories*,Boyd argues that “storytelling power has often been commandeered by the apparent promise of explanation, cohesion, conformity and control offered by fiction that has hardened into mythological and religious belief” (Boyd, 2009: 206). He further acknowledges that “as the West became increasingly secular, religions of art arose in Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century, in Symbolism at the end of the nineteenth, and in Modernism at the beginning of the twentieth.” (Boyd, 2009: 114)

*The Year* *of the Flood* is ultimately an exploratory journey of nature and the implications of religious belief. Danièle Hervieu-Léger however defines religion as “an ideological, practical, and symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed, and controlled” (Hervieu-Léger, 2000: 82) while Jacques Derrida cautions us against “oppos[ing] so naïvely Reason *and* Religion, Critique or Science *and* Religion, technoscientific Modernity *and* Religion” (Derrida, 1996: 65). One of the most tantalizing questions in the novelis whether it is a pre or post-apocalyptic dystopia – is the Waterless Flood, an end or a new beginning:

What this engagement with Atwood’s dystopias suggests, in the end, is that evocriticism falters as a metaphysics, but has value as a methodology among methodologies for thinking about the valences between religion and the literary imagination. As we have seen, it illuminates the link between religious belief and survival that Atwood makes in *The Year of the Flood*, demonstrating that the endurance of Ren, Toby, and a handful of their coreligionists is entirely congruent with scientific findings concerning how religion functions in an evolutionary perspective. The desire to bring science and the humanities into closer conversation is laudable. (Hoogheem, 2012: 69)

Yet, Atwood’s collectivistic ideas and her general preference for the survival of the human race make her a more pragmatic writer rather than an idealistic one and as a consequence she is less inclined to engage in Utopian visions. Hope is not explicitly developed in her tales, but rather implied by emphasizing a minimal change in her protagonist’s lives; it is true that they do survive but almost every time they find themselves in situations similar to their anterior near-death experiences and presenting no progress whatsoever. Atwood defends herself from charges of pessimism by describing her work as being like

an act of faith, hope, and charity because it cannot deny that the world consists of every place from Heaven to Hell…. It is the duty of the writer not to turn down a visit to any of them if it’s offered. Some …only live in a couple of these places, but nobody lives in just one…. Writing is an act of faith that someone is listening, hope that things will be better, and charity to write without flinching or bitterness. (Atwood, 1982: 349)

When she tackles with those ideas in the superior level of the psyche she does it with a sense of acknowledging that the spirit is permeating the physical world:

One of the ironies of her work is that despite the victimization she depicts, her narratorial voices often sound like they are romping through the world, like a mischievous imp stomping on the underbrush her characters are tangled in, as if to release them from clinging to all the petty details down below. Then, perched on her own tree, laughing above them, she beckons to the reader to gain a view of the forest composed of the myths of the collective unconscious. (Fand, 1995: 233)

In an interview the author observes the contrast between the image of nature seen as a benevolent Mother as opposed to the harsh conditions it sometimes creates: “I think most people have unconscious mythologies…. it’s a question of making them conscious, getting them out… where they can be viewed. And I don’t believe that people should divest themselves of all their mythologies because… in a way, everybody needs one. It’s just a question of getting one that is livable and not destructive to you.” (Atwood, 1990: 32)

Margaret Atwood’s literary style elaborates on the dualism between light and dark, positioning Light in the beginning, with an emphasis on the power of the words “Let there be Darkness” and the idea that the self inscribes *life* on the page of the story, “transforming its white sterility, like that of a Canadian winter, into survival by taking root in the dark earth underneath. Atwood’s idea of wholeness seems to be not a blank page of consciousness like a “vegetable” in primordial union with nature, but the inscribed *human* page, an integration between the words that fragment us and the spaces between them (Fand, 1995: 16). When looking at Atwood’s literary formation the most evident is her deep inspiration found in the literary sources of Canada (especially European fairy tales, but also North American Indian legends and Canadian literature) and her work during high school and college (English and American literature and the occult found in Victorian, gothic, and romance genres).

The novel’s main objective is to open up new perspectives for imagining a post-capitalist future through a satirical, science-fictional staging of capitalism’s ultimate breakdown and because of this it is based on a pattern of alternation between its narrative *present* and *past*. Atwood develops a desolate, decadent vision of the future that is fundamentally different from the traditional science fiction trope of continuous progress culminating with an ending that represents a crucial moment in the characters’ power of choice. This triumph of duality over scientific rationality is replicated outside the texts in the reader:

Do the surviving human beings in Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood represent a dystopic threat to the tiny utopia of genetically modified, peaceful, and sexually harmonious New Humans that is set to replace them? As it is always the reader rather than the writer that has the last word about any book, I leave that to you.” (Atwood, 2012: 93)

What *The Year of the Flood* is ultimately revealing is the fact that an astounding number of God’s Gardeners manage to survive something for which they were all completely unprepared – the collapse of civilization – and this was only due to their determination to change in front of the coming disaster. But Atwood’s moral is not that we should all become eco-religious separatists; her novel shouldn’t therefore be read as a blueprint for utopia, but as an asserting allegory of the urgent need of radically changing our social relations and anti-ecological lifestyles (cf. Canavan):

For it is the very principle of the radical break as such, its possibility, which is reinforced by the Utopian form, which insists that its radical difference is possible and that a break is necessary. The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things will be like after the break. (Jameson, 2007: 231-232)

**Works Cited**

Atwood, Margaret. *Conversations*. Earl G. Ingersoll, ed. Princeton: Ontario Review P, 1990.

-----------------------. *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. London: Virago, 2012.

----------------------- *Second Words. Selected Critical Prose*. Toronto: Anansi, 1982.

----------------------- *The Year of the Flood*. Random House LLC, 2009.

Boyd, Brian. *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2009.

Caruth, Cathy. “Trauma and Experience: Introduction.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP: 1995. 3-12.

Derrida, Jacques. “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone.” 1996. Trans. Samuel Weber. Acts of Religion. Ed. Gil Anidjar. New York: Routledge, 2002. 40-101.

Fand, Roxanne J. *The Dialogic Self: Reconstructing Subjectivity in Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood*. Susquehanna University Press, 1995.

Hervieu-Léger, Danièle. *Religion as a Chain of M*emory. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000.

Hoogheem, Andrew.“Secular Apocalypses: Darwinian Criticism and Atwoodian Floods” *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature*, Volume 45, Number 2, June 2012, pp. 55-71.

Snyder, Katherine V. *“Time to Go”: The Post-apocalyptic and the Post-traumatic in Margaret Atwood’s “Oryx and Crake”* Studies in the Novel Vol. 43, No. 4 (winter 2011), pp. 470-489.

Canavan, Gerry. “Hope, But Not for Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood.” *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 2012, 23:2, 138-159.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York: Verso, 2007.

1. Mihaela Prioteasa has a PhD in American Literature, and benefited from a scholarship from the POSDRU development project co-financed by the European Social Fund – Investing in People.Shewasgranted a research scholarship at Ruhr-Bochum University, Germany.Her thesis, *A Study of Edgar Allan Poe’s Imagery*, defended in 2012at the University of Craiova focuses on the literary formation of the American author with a view to analysing the literary discourse and the pattern of poetic imagery. Her domains of interest cover American and British Literature, Gothic Literature. E-mail: mihaela\_prioteasa20@yahoo.com [↑](#footnote-ref-2)