



SPECULATIVE FICTION AS A MIRROR: GENDER AND SEXUALITY ACROSS  
THREE WORKS

A thesis submitted to the  
Kent State University Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for University Honors

by

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May, 2014



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I absolutely must thank Dr. Kevin Floyd, my advisor, for his invaluable guidance on this project—in addition to giving advice and instructions on the project itself, Dr. Floyd got me through multiple panic attacks and many more worries over the course of the two semesters that went into making it. It goes without saying that this project would not be what it is without the advice and effort of Dr. Floyd, and it should also be noted that I might well have run off into the woods never to be seen by human eyes again without someone there to put everything into perspective and clarify the process.

I would also like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Howard, Dr. Matthew Shank, and Dr. Robin Joynes for sitting on my defense committee.

And I cannot forget my friend Susan, who “gently encouraged” me to get to work by nagging and occasionally threatening me into submission. I begged her for motivation, and she rose to the challenge wonderfully.

## INTRODUCTION

There are a number of common misconceptions about gender. One of the most common is the conflation of gender and biological sex. Although the two often happen to align within an individual, they are not the same. Biological sex is physical. There are a number of definitions of biological sex. The most basic definition is the categorization of genital development and other reproductive organs—for instance, in males, the gonads develop into testes; in females, the gonads develop into ovaries. However, not all people have one or the other, meaning that the definition is not perfect. There is also a genetic definition based upon the chromosomes present in an individual. Two X chromosomes denote a female, while one X and one Y chromosome denote a male, though this is not true across all species, and other configurations of X and Y chromosomes also exist in humans, making the classifications occasionally not applicable. Another way to determine biological sex is through hormone levels, which have varying levels which aid in expressing various secondary sex characteristics. However, none of the biological definitions apply to gender because gender is the result of an individual's socialization and viewpoint. More broadly, gender is an arbitrary way to classify individuals based upon societal expectations and associations.

Sexuality is more widely understood than gender in some ways, but there are a number of different traits and factors which make up a person's sexuality. The most well-known is sexual orientation, but even orientation is more complex than just



“homosexual” or “heterosexual.” There are also orientations like bisexual or pansexual, which describe the people to whom an individual is sexually attracted; asexual or demisexual, which describe the conditions under which someone feels sexual desire; and even homoromantic or heteroromantic, which describe a person’s capacity to form relationships which are romantic but not necessarily sexual. But orientation is not the only factor which makes up a person’s sexuality. Society directly dictates a great deal of sexuality. It is society which decides what behaviors, sexual and otherwise, are acceptable and what behaviors are taboo; these rules, morals, and taboos also help make up an individual’s sexuality.

Like sexuality, reproduction is also central to humanity and life in general. It is important for individuals that they reproduce, passing on their genes to the next generation. When individuals reproduce, they affect the population as a whole by helping to determine the makeup of society. Society influences who reproduces—society decides which traits are desirable in a breeding partner. Society also makes the rules and customs for reproductive methods; different cultures have different stances on birth control and abortion, along with different medical options for delivering children. After delivery, different cultures also dictate different ways of raising children to adulthood. All of these are important factors making up an individual’s reproductive practices, which, when combined, make up a society’s reproductive practices and population makeup and size.

Biology as well as society is important to human life—biology is the study of life, so it is inextricable from life, human or otherwise. Biological discoveries reveal that

there are certain undeniable biochemical influences on every organism ever discovered, including human organisms. Many cellular processes are common to most if not all cells, regardless of species: most cellular energy comes from the breaking of an unstable phosphorus bond of adenosine triphosphate (ATP). Every species has a different arrangement of genes, but all of them have those genes carried in the same chemical compounds: DNA. There are biological certainties across the board; there are species-specific biological certainties; there are ways that biology can predict both physical traits and behaviors. The influence of biology is incontrovertible.

As with anything, though, biology has limits. In genetics, for instance, many think that genes are like binary code, in which a piece of data is made up of zeroes and ones, which are mathematically absolute: a gene instructs something, and it is therefore a mathematical certainty. However, even purely physical traits in an organism are not due to simple instructions from genes. There are plenty of traits which depend upon multiple genes for expression. Some genes influence multiple traits. Often, genes are present in an organism and go unexpressed. Sometimes genes go unexpressed because they do not have full penetrance or expression; it is simply chance, for instance, that dictates whether a person with a gene for polydactyly will actually have extra digits and, if so, how many and where. More than just chance determines gene expression, though. The environment can have strong effects upon gene expression. Temperature can cause various genes to activate or deactivate. Other environmental factors can do the same. Species (and genes) with high plasticity are more sensitive to differences in environment than those with low plasticity. The mother's genes can even affect an organism's expression of traits.

Biology is flexible and open to influence, which is probably how life has lasted as long as it has, through multiple disasters.

For creatures as mentally advanced as humans, biology allows many more options. Fish have tiny brains and thus limited choices, if they even “think” at all; humans are able to create and invent in ways that change the environment in drastic ways. It is not ridiculous to think that humans are more adaptable to their environments as a result. One of the chief environments which affect humans is the social environment—humans are social in nature and have highly advanced societies in many ways. As social animals, humans naturally respond to the needs and demands of others in a social network. Society influences humans hugely in a variety of ways. The evidence is plain: humans across the planet are biologically one species, yet the behaviors of people in different places are vastly different. Some of the differences are due to the natural environment of a society. However, even when a society’s environment changes for one reason or another, they retain many of the behaviors characteristic of their culture. The society itself is part of the environment, and greatly affects the behavior of members of the society.

Literature, as well as being a very important part of society and culture, helps to illustrate and illuminate culture in a multitude of ways. Fiction reflects reality, sometimes in a truly realistic light, sometimes distorted. The two are linked together at every level. There can be no understanding of fiction without understanding of reality because that is the general wellspring of knowledge from which fiction draws. Speculative fiction shows this especially well. It takes the present reality or some aspect

of it and projects it forward, predicting possible consequences and changes along the way. Present trends are extrapolated, sometimes to extremes, in an attempt to show the present in a new (and somewhat alarming) fashion. Science fiction is related to speculative fiction, and the two often overlap, but where speculative fiction avoids fantastical elements for the most part, science fiction ventures into impossibilities. Good science fiction also acts to reflect the real present, or at least some aspect of it. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Woman on the Edge of Time* are all either speculative fiction, science fiction, or some blend of the two.

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* tells the story of Genly Ai, a human man from Terra (our planet) sent on a diplomatic mission to the planet Gethen, inhabited by humans who were genetically modified when they initially colonized the planet. As a result, the Gethenians have a unique biology. They are totally asexual, without biological sex, gender, or sexual desire, for most of the Gethenian year. A few times a year, however, they enter their sexual phase, kemmer, in which their body becomes either biologically female or male and they have a strong urge to procreate. After a few days of kemmer, they once again lose all sexual characteristics until the next time they go into kemmer, with the exception of those individuals who become pregnant during the kemmer phase. Genly Ai, as a Terran man with Terran biology, struggles to grasp many of the implications of Gethenian biology, along with the other differences in their society. In the end, he succeeds in his mission, bringing Gethen into the alliance of planets he represents, but his only friend on Gethen, Harth, dies.

As opposed to the science fiction of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is pure speculative fiction. Atwood, through her narrator, known only as Offred, describes the society of Gilead, which inhabits the ruins of the United States of America under a theocracy which viciously punishes any deviation from societal rules. Offred can remember the world before Gilead, allowing the audience to relate to her: she grows up in a world which is very familiar to readers. Gilead is very different, and Offred's place in Gilead is very different as well. Before Gilead, she was a working woman who went openly into the world and was free to do many things with her life. After the advent of Gilead, she becomes a Handmaid, a woman who was impure before the new regime's takeover and has been offered the opportunity to redeem herself through her body: a Handmaid must bear a living, healthy child for a privileged, infertile couple in the stead of the wife, or be declared Unwoman and sent to die in the nuclear waste zones.

Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, relates directly to humanity's future on Earth, but unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* has many elements of science fiction as well, namely time travel. Connie Ramos receives a traveler from the future via her own mind and soon begins to travel to the future with her—in her mind. She finds that the traveler—Luciente—comes from a peaceful, beautiful future that springs from a widespread proletarian revolution sometime after Connie's own time, and which focuses on repairing the damage to their society and their planet done by the overthrown culture that they replace. She also inadvertently visits an alternate future in which, for some reason, the revolution did not take place or at

least did not succeed, and in which most people are poor and end up contributing organs to the immortality of the rich. In Connie's own time (she only visits the future for short periods of time, and her body remains in her own time), she is institutionalized for a range of psychiatric symptoms. The patients, including herself, become the subjects of an incredibly invasive experiment in which doctors implant control devices directly into their brains. Connie starts her own revolution in the end, albeit in an incredibly murderous way that gets her stuck in a mental facility permanently.

Each work deals with a number of issues in a variety of areas, but gender, sexuality, and reproduction are important to all three works for a variety of reasons. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, gender is eradicated; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is institutionalized; *Woman on the Edge of Time* shows a scale in which gender slides from the unimportant to the incredibly important. Each work looks at sexuality in a different way, taking care and time with an incredibly complex topic and ending with as many questions as answers in each case. And reproduction, possibly the most basic part of life, has a variety of different methods, means, and customs in each work. Each of these topics in each work has one unifying feature: each one is strongly influenced or even directly controlled by the society surrounding it.

## GENDERLESS PLANET

Works of science fiction and speculative fiction—genres which often overlap—use strange, new environs in order to illuminate contemporary society in some way. Ursula K. Le Guin’s award-winning *The Left Hand of Darkness* blends the two genres to wonderful effect. In the work, Genly Ai, a human man from Terra, our own planet, is sent to a world called Gethen, also inhabited by humans, in order to encourage Gethen to begin diplomatic relations with other planets in the galaxy. While Genly Ai is, as a Terran man, easily relatable to audiences, the Gethenians are very different. Their society is different, as one would expect of people on a different planet, but the most spectacular differences between Terrans and Gethenians are primarily biological. The Gethenians are asexual, sexless, and genderless most of the time. However, a few times of the year, a time known as kemmer, they become one sex or the other, also becoming temporarily able to bear or sire children. After a short time, if the Gethenian has not become pregnant during their episode of sexuality, they revert to their original sexless state until the next time their kemmer comes around. Any Gethenian can become either female or male during any given kemmer, regardless of previous kemmer phases. While their biological nature is intriguing, it is their society which dictates some of the most important traits of their gender expression, sexual behavior, and reproduction.

Gender and sex are often confused—in fact, they are often conflated, and while it is true that gender and biological sex in an individual often match, they are not the same. Sex is biological: it refers to the chromosomal arrangement, genitalia, or base hormone levels of an individual, the specifics of which are dependent upon species and are physical traits. Gender is the combination of personality traits and feelings which a society and the individuals within a society generally agree form a category of person. Sex is determined by the physical body, while gender is emotional and intellectual and based upon societal norms and rules. Definitions of sex and gender are notoriously hard to tackle. Even women themselves find it difficult to define women: “The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question ‘Who am I?’ by saying ‘Tom’s wife ... Mary’s mother’” (Friedan 126). Genly’s answer—“I can’t tell you what women are like. I never thought about it much in the abstract, you know” (Le Guin 253)—has much the same nature as the mystique; women cannot be defined abstractly; they are defined only in relation to others, either as a compare and contrast exercise with men or as a listing of their roles in the lives of others. Gender for both men and women is much easier to contextualize than to define. Each is defined as related to the other.

In spite of the difficulties presented by gender definitions, gender is inherent to many Terran languages, including English. Since the story is told by a male human from Terra, it is written or translated into a gendered language. As a result, the story is told with gendered pronouns which the Gethenians do not have. One of the initial Investigators of the planet explains that “you cannot think of a Gethenian as ‘it.’ They



are not neuters. They are potentials, or integrals. Lacking the Karhidish ‘human pronoun’ used for persons in somer [latent phase of the sexual cycle in which Gethenians are without sex], I must say ‘he,’ for the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine” (Le Guin 101). The Gethenians have a different pronoun system, one which does not translate neatly into English, at least, and probably not into many other known languages, either—many languages have gendered pronouns, at the very least. Of course, to go with the gendered pronouns, there are terms referring to humans as individuals which inevitably have some element of gender—in English, at any rate, referring to something without indicating gender in some way implies thinghood rather than humanity. Names in English often indicate gender, though some names are given to either sex, and many terms have gendered connotations: though “beautiful” and “handsome” are roughly synonymous and do not have official gender, “beautiful” is more likely to be associated with female or feminine things or people, while “handsome” is more likely to be associated with male or masculine things or people.

The Gethenians, unlike Terrans, lack gender to the point that even the language denies it; Genly tries to explain what a woman is but “had to use the word that Gethenians would apply only to a person in the culminant phase of kemmer, the alternative being their word for a female animal” (Le Guin 38). Language often reveals a great deal about a culture or society—another peculiarity of Gethen is the amount of words for snow and ice; a planet with such extremely low temperatures necessitates defined words for specific weather conditions. In the case of the Gethenians, their

language reveals that they do have concepts of female and male. They are the only species on their planet with their unique and often asexual nature. Other animals on the planet come in either female or male varieties. They have a concept of biological sex in the constant fashion which Terrans experience. Nonetheless, they do not have a true concept of gender. It is not a limit of science or experience; they are aware that other organisms have biological sex, but they do not apply the concept to themselves in any way, and since lesser creatures often cannot be said to have gender as humans understand it, Gethenians have absolutely no need for gender categorizations.

As with language, gender becomes both central and meaningless in other ways in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: the reader must focus on gender because their language and society demands it, but many of the characters are completely unconcerned with gender. For them, it does not exist; they have a sex—temporarily—but the concept of gender is completely foreign to them. Through Genly Ai, readers receive a glimpse of a genderless world. However, Genly Ai, as a human from Terra, our own planet, brings his own misconceptions and assumptions to bear on the new planet. The obsession with gender comes partly from the reader, partly from Genly. In order to function on Gethen, Genly finds himself assigning gender identities to everyone around him, regardless of their lack of gender. He introduces characters with phrases like “My landlady, a voluble man” (Le Guin 49) and explains his assignments with thoughts on femininity and masculinity: “I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature” (Le Guin 50). Genly acknowledges the misconception on his part, explaining that “my efforts took the form of

self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own” (Le Guin 12).

It is through Genly that an important idea arises: gender is not always internalized. The Gethenians have no gender identity among themselves outside of kemmer. They simply see themselves as humans, undifferentiated by gender. The reader, however, thinks as Genly does because Genly is from the same society as the reader—namely, Terran society. On Terra, humans have gender. On Gethen, they do not. Generally, visitors to other societies must learn to accept the cultural mores of their hosts; Genly never truly does. He continues assigning them roles according to gender throughout his time on Gethen, much as he tries not to. Genly faces the eternal struggle of the traveler: the traveler or tourist knows that he or she must play by the rules of the host society, but knowledge and action are not the same. Societal rules and mores are impressed upon its members very deeply, often on a subconscious level. Such is Genly’s dilemma: he must integrate with Gethen’s society to some extent, but his own societal training is not easily forgotten. It is not because of his own gendered status that he confers gender upon the Gethenians, it is because his societal training expects gender labels.

The Gethenians even have a different concept of humanity from Terrans as a result of their genderless state. On Terra, at least in many societies, humanity is contingent upon a variety of factors, as it is upon Gethen. Some factors include intelligence, empathy, and a constant, recognizable moral code, differing dependent upon the culture which develops it. A human on Terra must be gendered in some way in order

to be recognized as human. The gender categorization is not always a simple female or male, but inevitably a society finds some gendered label to apply to its people. Even the basic linguistic unit of personhood, the pronoun, depends upon it. A human being must be assigned some gender by other human beings. Terrans do not come in neuter.

Gethenians do not either, but Terran society does not have a label which suits both their humanity and their lack of gender.

In other ways, gender does have a presence on Gethen—an unusual and taboo presence. The Gethenian pervert is one who is in kemmer at all times—a person such as exists on Terra, someone with a constant sexuality. In contrast with Terra, on Gethen “Excessive prolongation of the kemmer period, with permanent hormonal imbalance towards the male or the female, causes what they call perversion; it is not rare; three or four percent of adults may be physiological perverts or abnormal—normals, by our standard” (Le Guin 67). In a way, the perversion of Gethen, which is a form of gender identity or at least of set sexuality, contrasts with some specific occurrences of Terran sexuality. The accepted Terran idea of gender is that of two opposite sexes; however “In 2000, Anne Fausto-Sterling ... concluded that 1.7 per cent of the population develops in a way that deviates from the standard definition of male or female” (Levy 9). While the people of Earth do not generally call those people with untraditional sex characteristics “perverts,” they have other names for them, names that define them as “other” and abnormal: the offensive “hermaphrodite” and the more acceptable “intersex,” among others. The contrast with Gethen echoes many of the other differences between the two worlds. In Gethen, it is abnormal to have a single, defined sex; on Earth, it is abnormal

not to have a well-defined sex—“every baby born in the United States is registered as ‘male’ or ‘female’” (Levy 9) regardless of any inconsistencies between the baby and the label.

Due to the lack of gender on Gethen, however, one cannot classify the Gethenian pervert as gendered. The Gethenian pervert is permanently sexed; the pervert has biological sex at all times and is in that way like a Terran. The Gethenian pervert, however, still does not possess a gender label such as Terrans would use. They have a body which is biologically female or biologically male—or, possibly, biologically intersex; the text does not mention such a possibility one way or another—but they do not have the gendered identity a Terran would expect. They are outcasts of Gethenian society, but they are still defined and classified by that society, and Gethenian society recognizes no gender. The closest they have to a gender label would be “pervert,” making the “gender” of the majority “normal”; since “pervert” is its own, separate categorization, it cannot quite fulfill the role of a gender category.

The people of Gethen have only themselves, with their fluid sexes, and the abnormal members, their pervers, to comprehend sexuality, so it comes as no real surprise that they have no concept of a “woman”; their only concept of a “man” in the sense of a male human rather than a nonspecific term for human comes from Genly himself. Harth, Genly’s only real friend and supporter on Gethen, who rescues him and is essential to the success of his mission, asks him at one point “how does the other sex of your race differ from yours?” (Le Guin 252). Genly’s answer is strangely vague for someone who spends an entire book generalizing people on his perception of their

masculine and feminine traits. Perhaps such vagueness should not be a surprise. Terran society is a dual society. It acknowledges women and men as two parts of society at such an integral level that it is difficult to articulate by a member of that society. While the subconscious nature of gender definitions might seem to indicate a biological root for their existence, it seems more likely that they are simply a basic tenet of Terran society so deeply ingrained that its members take their existence for granted and do not bother to articulate their rules.

There are numerous differences in sexual behaviors between Terra and Gethen. It is tempting, when viewing Gethenian society, to attribute all such differences as a direct result of their differing biologies. Such a view ignores the complexities of sexual behaviors and results in an incomplete understanding of the situation, though there can be no doubt that the unique sexual cycle of the Gethenians plays a role in their behaviors. But despite the differences between Gethenians and Terrans, Gethenians are just as human as Terrans, and part of humanity is the understanding that humans are complex creatures with drives that do not always correspond to basic biology. Humans are not animals and are capable of higher thought and reason. Reducing something as complex as human sexuality to basic genetics results in a grave misunderstanding of the situation. Even simpler physical traits are not based solely upon an organism's genes—the environment has varying effects upon many traits in many species, including humans. Sexual attitudes are more complex than basic traits to begin with and should be treated as such. Society is a huge environmental factor in sexuality and sexual expression.

The Gethenians of *Left Hand* have their own sexual mores which differ from the familiar Terran ideas of sexual appropriateness. For one thing, they have little or no embarrassment discussing sex: “Karhiders [the citizens of Karhide, one of the countries of Gethen] discuss sexual matters freely, and talk about kemmer with both reverence and gusto” (Le Guin 67). Rather than being overly modest with their sexuality, as Terrans are, the Gethenians are happy to share their sexual exploits with those around them. The contrast between the two is stunning. On Earth, “modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship” (Foucault 1502). Though Foucault reveals gradually that the censorship of sexual discussion is simply a new form of sexual discussion, the intent of the censors remains: they do not want to discuss sex freely. The free discussion of sexuality is a symptom of deeper sexual freedom in the Gethenians.

In contrast to Gethen, many efforts of contemporary western Terran society go towards stifling sex in one manner or another. Valenti explains that the virginity movement has one certain aim, and that is to tell people that “Sex makes us less whole and a whole lot dirtier” (Valenti 41). Sexual morals on Terra tend towards repression. Society demands such an ideology—humanity’s closest relatives, chimps and bonobos, are not repressed in such a way, indicating that such Terran attitudes are not genetic. On Gethen, sex is often celebrated for its own sake, and the morals of Terra are very different in many ways from those of Gethen. For instance, one of the Investigators observes that “Kemmer is not always played by pairs. Pairing seems to be the commonest custom, but

in the kemmerhouses of towns and cities, groups may form and intercourse take place promiscuously among the males and females of the group” (Le Guin 98). As a people, this freedom may be due to the place sex holds within their society: sexual desire is not constant but it does affect everyone equally; it has its own place in society separate from the rest of life. Rather than being present at all times, it is an occasional event that Gethenians treat as such. As human beings, Gethenians would be expected to display similar sexual attitudes to Terrans if those sexual attitudes were biological imperatives. Since they do not, there must be some other rationale.

Of course, sexuality is not always accepted within Gethenian society. There are instances of repression both voluntary and involuntary. One country on Gethen develops ways to suppress the kemmer sexual cycle altogether in order to keep undesirable portions of the population docile and meek. Genly notes the effects himself at the Farm, where the country in question sends political prisoners to labor and possibly die in the cold. He says that “I took this lifelessness and leveling at first for the effect of the privation of food, warmth, and liberty, but I soon found out that it was more specific an effect than that: it was the result of drugs given all prisoners to keep them out of kemmer” (Le Guin 189). Moreover, Genly observes that “Prisoners who had been there for several years were psychologically and I believe to some extent physically adapted to this chemical castration.... They were without shame and without desire, like the angels. But it is not human to be without shame and without desire” (Le Guin 190). By stealing their sexuality, the powers that be are also stealing their humanity and their will. The drugged Gethenians have little left in the way of mental character; their knowledge may



or may not remain, but their actual mental abilities are greatly lessened by the unceasing use of drugs as a suppression device. Those who run the Farm use the workers' own sexualities against them, using desire as the tool to truly destroy any independence remaining in them.

The Farm uses medication to alter the sexuality of prisoners. Their new state of sexlessness comes from a drug. In short, it is directly caused by a biochemical component. However, the drug in this case is the means, not the underlying cause. At some point, the society decides that it is more useful or appropriate to chemically neuter prisoners on the Farms. Perhaps the sexual drive is considered unnecessary in prisoners doing menial labor. Perhaps the consequent docility and passivity are the main reason to destroy the prisoners' sexuality. There are any number of reasons that it might be considered desirable to drug the Farm prisoners in such a way. As Genly, the main narrator, is an outsider in the society, he is not privy to the reasons behind the drugs, but it is certain that the society neuters prisoners for a reason. The biochemical changes to prisoners are the result of societal demands.

In other instances, Gethenians harness their own sexuality for their own individual purposes. Genly notes that "Abstinence is entirely voluntary; indulgence is entirely acceptable" (Le Guin 190). The idea of abstinence and indulgence as being equally acceptable and equally unremarkable—each in its own way—marks a very different line of thought than certain schools of Terra. Some offer abstinence as a moral necessity: "Staying 'pure' and 'innocent' is touted as the greatest thing we can do" (Valenti 24). On the other hand, proponents of safe sex believe that "Perhaps it's true that in our sex-

saturated culture, it does take a certain amount of self-discipline to resist having sex, but restraint does not equal morality.... If this were simply about resisting peer pressure and being strong, then the women who have sex because they actively want to ... wouldn't be scorned" (Valenti 25). Though some believe that everyone should remain abstinent until such time as they receive official orders from God that they are okay to breed and others believe that sex is a personal choice, one thing differentiates both sides from the ideology of Gethen. On Gethen, both abstinence and sexual activity are personal choices without societal consequence; the choice of sexuality is left to the individual exclusively with only the example of the Farm as a sexually controlled environment. On Terra, however, large groups of people argue over the best way for everyone else to have or not have sex. Society on Gethen could operate similar sexual pressures, but it does not. On Terra, society decrees that personal sexuality is something that must be debated and discussed on a larger stage. On Gethen, society decrees that personal sexuality is a personal choice without stigma. The Gethenians are not closer to nature, they simply have a different societal framework for dealing with sexuality.

In many cases on Gethen, abstinence is not a case of misplaced morality, but serves instead as a visible signifier of self-control. Handdara, one of the main religions of Gethen—one of two mentioned, one the offshoot of the other—practices self discipline to a large extent; they practice “the Handdara discipline of Presence, which is a kind of trance ... involving self-loss (self-augmentation?) through extreme sensual receptiveness and awareness” (Le Guin 60). Even outside the Handdara Fastnesses, which are something like monasteries or retreats for the disciples of Handdara, the people of Gethen

learn certain forms of self-discipline which their world demands. Harth explains that “we practice privation until we’re experts at it. I was taught how to starve as a child at home in Estre, and by the Handdarata in Rotherer Fastness” (Le Guin 275). Gethenians also practice such self-discipline sexually; though their sexual desire during the active phase of kemmer is extreme, they deny it for reasons like their Foretelling, an incredibly accurate method of prediction which the Handdara practice, or their own strength. Abstinence grants the Gethenians certain privileges which they might not otherwise access.

Another example of Gethenian self-control comes from the practice of vowing kemmering, in which couples swear to be faithful and to share their kemmer with no one else—similar to a marriage. As the Investigator explains, “It has no legal status, but socially and ethically is an ancient and vigorous institution” (Le Guin 98). On Terra, meanwhile, the nature of marriage is primarily legal—other aspects exist, but the main significance of marriage itself is a legal binding of two people and their kin. As a result of the legislation of marriage, marriage inevitably changes: “as government grew to be a more active participant in marriage, making marriage more and more a legal institution of the nation-state rather than a customary network of kinship, the appeal of love’s rebelliousness in the face of spreading regulation intensified” (Warner 101). On Gethen, where vowing kemmering is a custom untouched by any government approval—as is the case with many Gethenian customs, at least in Karhide—the institution remains a bond of love and passion. Terra, on the other hand, recreates marriage as primarily legal—though the history indicates a substantial difference in meaning from the beginning between

marriage and vowing kemmering, as marriage probably started as a political move, as evinced by the number of ancient contracts which were bound by marriages. Warner notes that “The modern legal machinery of marriage is powered, paradoxically, by the love-couple’s ability to transcend law. The state merely certifies a love that is beyond law” (Warner 103).

The two societies have two similar institutions centering around the importance of pair-bonding. Their existence might indicate that human beings tend to naturally gravitate towards monogamous mating, or they might not. The differences between the two are more important. The Gethenian vow of kemmering is a respected tradition. It has no legal status and no legal entanglements. It is, however, limited in other ways—it cannot be rescinded or redone. Terran marriage allows both options and is carefully regulated by the government on many levels, from taxation to sexual acts. The two societies take similar institutions and make them radically different.

Reproduction—or, more specifically, the customs surrounding reproduction—differ a great deal between Gethen and Terra. For one thing, inheritance is what might be called “matrilineal.” Though Gethenians lack a female mother, “Descent of course is reckoned, all over Gethen, from the mother, the ‘parent of the flesh’” (Le Guin 98). It makes more sense than any other method. The only real, existing information about a child’s parentage that can ever be reckoned to a certainty is who gives birth to the child—the sire could be anyone, especially in a society like Gethen’s, where there is no stigma on bearing or siring children outside of vowed kemmering pairs. As there can be no descent account based solely on gender on Gethen, the only remaining way to factor

descent is the most logical: through the mother. The method of inheritance contrasts with many (but not all) of the dominant cultures of Terra: many societies traditionally believe that children belong to their father, and their inheritance comes from that same parent.

Possibly as a consequence of such inheritance customs, there seems to be no concern with virginity on Gethen. After all, on Terra, “a long-standing historical interest in virginity is about establishing paternity (if a man marries a virgin, he can be reasonably sure the child she bears is his) and about using women’s sexuality as a commodity” (Valenti 22). The Terran obsession with virginity stems from a societal concern with paternal inheritance. While Gethen still acknowledges the possibility of infidelity, their inheritance depends only on one parent. The Karhiders become excited for good reason over the news that “King Argaven had announced his expectation of an heir. Not another kemmering-son, of which he already had seven, but an heir of the body, king-son. The king was pregnant” (Le Guin 106). Though the king has seven children already, all of them presumably his without a doubt, only this child would be seen as worthy of taking the throne: only this child would be the king’s own blood beyond all question. So, while one of the existing children might take the throne if the king dies without a child of the flesh, as is hinted within the book, the preference is always towards the children of the flesh. This is also the cause of Estraven’s assertion that he has no children, although he has sired several with multiple partners.

The raising of children also occurs differently on Gethen than on Terra. Genly observes that in Hearths, away from the cities and urban life, “Here the clan looked after its own [children]; nobody and everybody was responsible for them” (Le Guin 105).

Rather than relying upon one person to look after their children, or even one family, the clan looks after all the children of the clan together. The Investigator notes that “The fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be ... ‘tied down to childbearing,’ implies that no one is quite so thoroughly ‘tied down’ here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be—psychologically or physically” (Le Guin 100). Rather than having one gender that takes care of children and one that goes out into the world, the Gethenians simply share the burden of both duties equally; responsibilities can only be shared equally when both partners are equal and sexually the same. The method of raising children differs greatly from many Terran cultures, in which only a child’s parents and possibly their close family members have charge of their children. Even schools, in which children are entrusted to teachers and school administrators for hours during the day, must defer to the parents in any decision relating to the child. Everything from class movies to, in some cases, school subjects must be approved by the parents. The parents have the power; the teacher merely acts as a service for the parent.

Though teachers take on some of the burden, the childbearing sex is unfairly burdened. Genly explains that “Even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still after all do all the childbearing, and so most of the child-rearing” (Le Guin 253). The female of the species is relegated to childcare, while the male goes free—if he so desires, at any rate. To a certain extent, women are tied to their children and families beyond all hope of extrication. Friedan notes that “In the feminine mystique, there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future. There is no way she can even dream about herself, except as her children’s mother, her

husband's wife" (Friedan 115). The description shows a part of American history in which society expects women to stay at home and find their fulfillment in menial labor and childcare while men go out and conquer the universe. Though it depicts a certain stretch of time—a fairly short stretch, at that—the basic truth remains the same throughout history: to some varying extent, women are expected to remain home and certainly to take care of children, while men do not need to share in that responsibility.

Gethen has child bearers as well—obviously. And it is true that those child bearers are constrained for the length of gestation. After giving birth, they are still parents, and therefore responsible for their child or children. However, so is the rest of their community, and everyone in that community could be and probably is at some point a child bearer as well, leading to the same amount of freedom from childcare concerns for everyone within the community. There is no question of one person raising children and nothing else while another completely abandons those duties and does some other task.

As a work of science fiction, *The Left Hand of Darkness* provides a unique glimpse of Terran society as seen in a hypothetical mirror. The world of Gethen differs from Terra in a number of ways, from its inhabitants to its climate, but the realities of human nature remain basically the same from one world to the next. The world as viewed by Genly Ai allows the audience a glimpse into another planet and another society, peopled by humans much like those on Terra, whose society has adjusted the outward expression of their humanity. Society in particular plays a large role in the gender expression, sexual behaviors, and reproductive habits of the people of Gethen, particularly as they contrast with Terrans.

## SEXUAL DYSTOPIA

The role of speculative fiction is to shine a light on contemporary society.

Margaret Atwood excels at such writing, and her work *The Handmaid's Tale* is a prime example of such writing. In *Handmaid*, Atwood shows a world which is absolutely possible, without the more fantastic, utterly impossible elements of science fiction or fantasy to soften the blow. In fact, it should be noted that each individual tool of oppression within *Handmaid* comes from a real life example, as is noted in the “Historical Notes” after the narrative by Offred; *Handmaid* merely represents a recombination of various indignities. *Handmaid* is the story of Offred, a woman in a nation called Gilead, located on the eastern edge of the former United States of America. As the name hints, Gilead is a religious nation. Although the religion of Gilead is based upon modern Christianity, it is not Christianity, having elements which are novel to the religion, as well as copiously edited Biblical passages to support the leadership and laws of Gilead. Offred occupies a particular part of Gilead society: she is a Handmaid. Handmaids are those women judged as impure by Gilead, who are permitted to live in Gilead in spite of their unworthiness in exchange of the use of their reproductive systems. A Handmaid is given to an infertile couple to bear children for them. If the Handmaid is unable to bear children, they are sent to do hard labor and die. After Offred's story ends, it is revealed in the section “Historical Notes” that the story is a transcription of tapes she



makes as she escapes from Gilead; the “Historical Notes” is a transcript of a speech analyzing the tapes long after the society of Gilead collapses. *A Handmaid’s Tale* contains a great deal of general information on how society influences and controls gender and sexuality along with its depiction of a foreign, unfamiliar world.

In some known species, there is only one sex. In others, however, there are the generally expected two sexes—male and female—but one or the other of those sexes are further divided into different genders. Sex, of course, is a matter of physical biology, while gender is more a matter of behavior and socialization. The different genders are generally differentiated by distinct behaviors and appearances. One species of lizard, the side-blotched lizard, has three male morphs, which correspond to behaviors (Alonzo and Barry 177), which is what would be expected of different genders of male. *The Handmaid’s Tale* shows a similar occurrence. In *Handmaid*, the women of Gilead are divided into different groups: Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, Aunts, Econowives, and a hidden group, Jezebels. Each of these is more than simply a grouping, however; each different group is a different gender of female. Each has its own expected appearance and behaviors.

The genders of Gilead each have their own carefully defined gender roles. A woman, or at least a Handmaid, in Gilead, must be fruitful; “There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (Atwood 61), and of course any Handmaid who is barren is summarily declared Unwoman. In the eyes of Gilead, a barren Handmaid is no woman at all. The gender expectations of a woman in Gilead are many, but the key trait of Handmaid womanhood is fruitfulness. Since the barren

Handmaid—the Unwoman—does not fit into the paradigm of gender which Gilead recognizes, the Unwoman must be exiled and punished. It should also be noted that the paradigm of fruitfulness is not categorized as nature or physical reality. It is instead the law of the land. Society decrees that the nature of women is to be fruitful or to be barren; society legislates that Handmaids either provide children for Gilead or die.

Of course, the female genders of Gilead are created by society, not biology, which is why they require such careful handling. One probable reason for this creation is to divide the female sex: women, after all, make up roughly fifty percent of the population, usually slightly more; in a society like Gilead, in which there is a constant war being waged against neighboring groups with conquest in mind—the text does not explain the constant warfare, probably because of the narrator’s own limited information—with men always away fighting and probably dying somewhere else (the women of Gilead, of course, do not fight), the likelihood is that there are more women than men. At the same time, the women of Gilead are a dehumanized segment of the population; Offred’s Commander explains it to her: “We thought we could do better.... Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some” (Atwood 211). The “some” in Gilead’s newly created culture is the women. Dehumanized and devalued segments of the population which are still necessary for the society as a whole must be kept from revolting in some fashion. Since women are necessary and also a threat to the regime due to their number, steps must be taken to keep them from some form of rebellion. Those in charge of Gilead do so by a conscious effort to keep women from defining themselves as women first, thereby creating a collective identity; instead, they

divide them into smaller groups, with great success. Offred says that “Beneath her veil the first one [Econowife] scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the sidewalk. The Econowives do not like us [Handmaids]” (Atwood 44). The Wives hate them as well: Offred pictures them talking together after dismissing a pregnant Handmaid, calling them “Little whores, all of them, but still, you can’t be choosy” (Atwood 115).

The gendered competition is no new circumstance, so the leaders of Gilead no doubt expect the same from the new female genders. Competition is both natural and generally encouraged in human societies, to varying extents. *The Feminine Mystique* notes that “Because the race to get ahead, in the big organization, in every profession in America, is so terribly competitive for men, competition from women is somehow the last straw—and much easier to fight by simply evoking that unwritten law” (Friedan 273). The “unwritten law” Friedan mentions is that of women’s inferiority, or at least that the gender role of women demands submission. As part of society, women must compete in some way or other, but in a society like those which Friedan or Atwood describe, they cannot compete as equals to men because society cripples them due to their sex. It all comes right back to gender roles: women in 1950’s America stay within their expected role of housewife and mother and, possibly, unskilled worker; the women of Gilead stay firmly within their more blatantly defined gender roles.

Since the female genders of Gilead are artificial in nature, one might expect that they would be rigidly, strictly enforced—and they are. Gender roles are central to the culture of Gilead. The whole culture rests on the arbitrary gender definitions and the

division of tasks and roles between them. Existing cultures note similar reliance: “sexual segregation [is] ‘functional’ in terms of keeping the social structure as it is” (Friedan 202). Friedan also notes (of another culture) that “this ... society was a ‘shaky structure, protected by endless taboos and precautions’—by women’s shame, fluttery fear, indulgence of male vanity—and it survived only as long as everyone kept the rules” (Friedan 216). To a certain extent, what Friedan says is true of every society; if no one keeps the rules of a society (which are not necessarily the same as laws), the society is not actually a society. The rules in Friedan’s example, in fact, are not laws in the strictly legal sense which the contemporary United States would consider them, but rather rules which maintain an arbitrary structure and which may be shattered completely with small disobedience as opposed to widespread resistance and revolt. However an outsider may view the culture and its rules, the fact remains that the society exists and is structured upon its own rules, regulations, and needs. As with any culture, some of the demands concern gender.

The separation of men and women in *Handmaid* is exactly the kind of fragile cultural more Friedan describes. Offred hints at it, thinking that her mother “wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists” (Atwood 127). Offred’s mother, a feminist, wishes for a culture separate from men; Gilead creates one. Offred’s mother, one may rightfully assume, wishes for a culture in which women are free—Gilead creates a separate women’s culture by the simple method of making sure women are bound and inferior. Any oppressed group within a society forms its own cultural rules and structures, simply as a means of self-defense against their oppressors;

they close ranks against more privileged classes, forming their own society-within-a-society. Gilead is no exception, partly by the design of the privileged classes. Rather than simply oppressing a group (women, in this instance, though they do worse to other groups, less visible within the narrative), they design the newborn women's culture to suit the needs of the new societal structure of Gilead. While still undeniably and intentionally oppressive, the created subculture can disguise itself as freeing and individualistic rather than as another tool of oppression.

Even the punishments of Gilead often revolve around created gender: the most feared and almost inevitable punishment for Handmaids is the title Unwoman. The only way to prevent being declared Unwoman—for a Handmaid, at least—is to give birth: a Handmaid who gives birth to a live, healthy baby will “never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward” (Atwood 127). Unwoman is the gender equivalent of Untouchable, in many ways. An Unwoman is no longer one of the approved female genders of Gilead and, as such, has no place within Gileadean society. Instead, they are exiled from Gilead to do hard labor in radioactive nuclear waste zones until they die (the cause of the radioactivity is not explicitly described within the narrative, but probably coincides with the origins of Gilead itself). An Unwoman has not fulfilled her gender role—in the case of Handmaids, she has not borne a live, healthy child for a worthy couple. The result of such willful disobedience is death in the radioactive Colonies. Handmaids are unsurprisingly eager to fulfill their gender role—that is, bear children for Gilead—since the alternative is a painful death.

Gender is not the only social structure which Gilead redefines. Sexuality also takes on new forms in Gilead. One form of sexuality in Gilead comes in the form of rape. Deny it though they do, Gilead on the whole has an obsession with rape. And they do deny it: “Women were not protected then [before Gilead] ... In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (Atwood 24). According to the establishment in Gilead, rape does not happen in Gilead—they are supposedly free from rape as an apparent result of no longer being free to do what they want—and in the rare event that it does, it is punishable by Particicution, in which the rapist is ripped apart by the bare hands of Handmaids. But not only the establishment denies the existence of rape in Gilead. Offred herself denies it as well. During the ceremony between Commander, Wife, and Handmaid in which the Commander attempts to impregnate the Handmaid while she is restrained by the Commander’s Wife, Offred says “Nor does rape cover it [the ceremony]: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose” (Atwood 94). Of course, she also reminds the audience that “One detaches oneself” (Atwood 95).

Both denial and dissociation are typical responses to rape, especially rape which may not be physically violent (though rape itself is an act of violence, it often occurs without vicious beatings; Offred’s sexual encounter with the Commander is an example of such). According to Warshaw, “For many women, denial works as a way to protect themselves against the pain of what they’re experiencing” (55). Warshaw also explains that “Along with disbelief and denial comes a phase during the actual rape when the

woman may feel physically and mentally removed from what is happening.... As with denial, dissociation is a protective reaction that helps the victim survive the experience by not feeling it completely” (55-56). The impregnation ceremony definitely has the feel of rape. Offred responds to it as to a rape, with dissociation and denial, in spite of her assurances to the contrary. The Historical Notes provides a decisive judgment: the speaker calls it “the collective rape ceremony” (Atwood 307) without condition.

Gilead denies the existence of rape within their society, yet their society is built upon rape in the form of the ritualized impregnation of Handmaids. So there must be a reason why Offred, who detests the whole society and her place within it, would deny the reality of her situation even when it puts her in collusion with the very society which oppresses her. The answer comes down to something which Offred addresses many times: she accepts her rape because she wants power. To be raped is to be made powerless: it means having the body violated in an incredibly intimate fashion. Consent is important because it establishes power. Consenting to sex means having power over any sexual partners, even if that power is equal to all participants. By claiming that she consents to the sexual contact involved in the ceremony, Offred tries to claim some measure of power and control over herself and her situation. Though all the power rests with the Commander, Offred can comfort herself with the false knowledge that at least she chooses her hell for herself. So to Offred, her rape is not rape; rape would make her powerless; her own powerlessness would make her hopeless; it cannot be rape.

Offred’s denial is made easier by Gilead, which redefines rape in such a way that the impregnation ceremony, which coerces women to have sex in order to become

pregnant, is not counted as a form of rape. The societal redefinition of rape results in rape statistics which appear to support the official stance. It seems true, even to outsiders, that physically violent rape is extremely rare in Gilead. Rape is an expression of power within a society: it declares that the attacker has more power over the victim and the victim's body than the victim. Many societies—such as the present United States—have high rape statistics. The common theory of the United States rape problem is that rape is common within the society because the current power trends are changing, and the traditionally privileged classes feel threatened. As a result, individuals exercise power over other individuals as a way to reinforce traditional institutionalized power imbalances. In Gilead, such institutionalized power imbalances are in no danger of changing and are integral to the stability and structure of the society. As a result, it is not necessary for individuals to reinforce their power and privilege upon others. Society does it for them in the form of class restrictions and establishment-approved violence. The people who have power do not need to lash out with it, and the people who do not have social power do not have the option. Society itself perpetrates a kind of mass rape upon disenfranchised classes at the hands of privileged classes, so there is no need for individuals to seize upon opportunities for one-on-one acts of rape.

In a sexually charged society like Gilead, sexual objects also have some form of power. Handmaids are the chief symbols and objects of sex in Gilead. Offred uses her limited power as much as she can: “They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It’s like ... teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach.... I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there”



(Atwood 22). As a member of an utterly disenfranchised class within Gilead, any power is precious power, and Offred clings to any shreds of control that come her way, however tenuous. Foucault explains that “The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments.... There was undoubtedly an increase in effectiveness and an extension of the domain controlled, but also a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure” (1518). By focusing so much on sexuality, controlling that sexuality, and destroying pleasure, Gilead creates a new fascination with sexual power and the derivation of sensual pleasure from less overtly sexual methods. Offred spends time contemplating an egg; “To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure.... The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg. Blessings that can be counted, on the fingers of one hand” (Atwood 110-111). Offred has no freedom, no real sexuality (though her role is now that of a sexual object), and no independence in Gilead. As Foucault predicts, she still finds pleasure in some areas. Since Gilead needs her body, they cannot starve her or injure her too badly; if their strategy of utterly destroying sensual pleasure in her backfires, there is only so much more they can do to her. With the destruction of typical outlets, the urges which Gilead abhors do not disappear; rather, they transform so that someone can find pleasure in basic objects and events. Gilead does exert control over even small pleasures, however.

Because even Gilead knows that humans need some outlets, they allow them, but channel and control them. During Janine’s birth, “Someone has spiked the grape juice. Someone has pinched a bottle, from downstairs. It won’t be the first time at such a

gathering; but they'll turn a blind eye. We too need our orgies" (Atwood 125). While Gilead officially forbids the "orgy" at the birth—women intended to be nothing more than breeders would be understandably discouraged from imbibing, even without the issues of control surrounding the Handmaid institution—but chooses to ignore it, they also provide their own outlets for repressed sexuality and energy. The Historical Notes reveal that the Particution ceremony is intended as "not only a particularly horrifying and effective way of ridding [Gilead] of subversive elements but that it would also act as a steam valve for the female elements in Gilead.... [I]t must have been most gratifying for these Handmaids, so rigidly controlled at other times, to be able to tear a man apart with their bare hands every once in a while" (Atwood 307-308). In place of everyday release, Gilead grants Handmaids a massive release of violent tension at uncommon intervals. Particution in Gilead serves much the same purpose as rape in other societies: it allows for a display of power.

In many ways, Gilead is a contradictory society: it both revolves around sex and rejects sex. The designers of Gilead fill it with sexuality and then repress that sexuality until it explodes. Gilead forbids even normal, solitary release; Offred says that the Guardians she taunts "will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds. They have no outlets now except themselves, and that's a sacrilege. There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes" (Atwood 22). All the denial of sexuality creates more sexual tension than it could ever prevent. The Guardians have no form of release—and the audience finds that their control is not perfect; hanging on the Wall are the bodies of Gilead's executed criminals, including two with "purple placards hung around their

necks: Gender Treachery. Their bodies still wear the Guardian uniforms. Caught together, they must have been, but where? A barracks, a shower?” (Atwood 43).

The execution of Gender Traitors shows a few things about Gilead. First, it shows that there is no tolerance for any sexuality that is not geared towards childbirth. Homosexuality is not tolerated because it cannot result in children. Considering the methods and goals of Gilead, the intolerance and murder does not surprise. More notably, though, the bodies hanging on the Wall come soon after Offred teases the Guardians at the gate and mentions their inability to relieve their sexual tension. The two hanging on the Wall now are Guardians. The Guardians on the whole are young men—even teenagers, sometimes—who have no form of sexual relief that is not proscribed. In the total absence of women or even images of women, the Guardians’ barracks can only be like a prison, sexually speaking. At some point, someone is inevitably going to be desperate enough to try homosexual intercourse—and that person, those people, are then executed for “Gender Treachery.” However, much as Gilead officially abhors and punishes homosexual behaviors, Gilead’s society both requires and creates such sexual behaviors. Gilead demands the repression of almost all sexuality, the exception being sexual acts of procreation. Biology can only be repressed so far, and the repression means that citizens of Gilead seek and find other outlets. Moreover, Gilead’s society functions only with the aid of harsh punishments for offenders to discourage widespread disapproved behaviors. In order to create examples, Gilead first needs offenders. The poor bodies hanging on the Wall serve as a pillar of Gilead in their own way.

Of course, no biological system can last without reproduction, and animals reproduce sexually—cloning is still not really a viable option and is definitely not as reasonable a method as the natural one. Gilead’s obsession with reproduction—their only real, approved form of sexuality—drives much of the rest of their society. As the “Historical Notes” point out, “Men ... were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness by having produced one or more healthy children, a desirable characteristic in an age of plummeting Caucasian birthrates” (Atwood 304). It makes sense for a population to increase reproduction when low birth rates threaten it; the Historical Notes recognize that “The need for what I may call birth services was already recognized in the pre-Gilead period” (Atwood 305). Even before Gilead, the problems which lead to Gilead are seen and dealt with—they are ineffective, as the rise of Gilead shows, but the attempt exists and has no element of coercion. Gilead, on the other hand, relies upon coercion.

There are any number of reasons why Gilead would use such extreme measures to deal with the birth rate crisis. One possible motive might deal with the war. Gilead takes over not by cooperation, but by force; their coup comes not as a result of transparency but of violence and guile. Probably partly due to the chosen methods, Gilead is at war. For a country at war, low birth rates create desperation. Without enough soldiers (at least until such time as robot warriors take over the battlefield), a country is doomed to lose. Since Gilead desperately wants to spread its influence over much of the rest of the world, its war is crucial. As a result, Gilead needs soldiers; it needs to keep a steady supply of cannon fodder. Since Gilead confines all women to strict, traditional gender roles,

women cannot fight in Gilead's army—but women must still contribute to the war effort in some way. The Wives do it by knitting scarves for the soldiers (the Angels) or buying prayers at Soul Scrolls. The Handmaids must serve their society with their bodies: they must make future soldiers in the form of sons, or at least future soldier factories in the form of daughters. They give their children to those who control Gilead—or at least those who have enough to have Handmaids. It is made clear at the birth that the baby does not belong to the mother because the mother is a Handmaid: "The Commander's Wife looks down at the baby as if it's a bouquet of flowers: something she's won, a tribute.... It's the Wives who do the naming, around here" (Atwood 126). Even the children born to current Handmaids in pre-Gilead times belong to someone else now: Offred's daughter belongs to another family now, and Offred has been "erased" from her daughter's memory (Atwood 228).

The attitude towards children and reproduction—that children do not belong to the mother, that they instead belong to either the state to distribute or to a man rich enough to buy a woman—creates other consequences as well. Abortion naturally has no place in Gilead: "No woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky as to conceive" (Atwood 33). And of course it is extremely illegal in Gilead in any case, no matter the circumstances; "You can't have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term" (Atwood 112) even in spite of the apparent high risk of "Unbabies" which are too deformed to survive outside the womb for long. Echoes of such beliefs exist even today, with "'fetal protection' laws [which create] a slippery slope for pregnant women, who are being thrown in prison simply for failing to give birth

to a healthy baby” (Valenti 126-127). The Handmaids are punished for giving birth to inadequate Unbabies; pregnant women in the United States (and other countries, for that matter) are increasingly at risk of facing situations in which miscarriage may be seen as evidence of child abuse or negligence, as Valenti points out; Paltrow and Flavin analyze patterns of pregnant women arrested in the United States and conclude that pregnant women have been arrested in the past for seeking “to go to term in spite of a drug problem” (300). The possibility arises in both cases from a misplacement of priorities. Rather than treating women as humans who happen to be able to carry fetuses, the establishment treats fetuses as humans who happen to be carried by walking wombs, also known as women. When fetuses are granted the rights of full human beings, the result is inevitable: women—or at least pregnant women—are treated as less than human because the rights of the fetus are more worthy of protection by dint of being seen as innocent. In *Handmaid*, the audience sees the extreme consequences of such a reversal.

*Handmaid* shows the lengths to which a desperate society can be driven. Gilead is short on people. The society needs more people in order to survive and thrive. As a result, societal priorities are rearranged. Rather than simply disposing of impure, unworthy women in the societal purge, Gilead must conscript them to fulfill a necessary function. They must serve with their bodies. They must bolster the population. Gilead needs more citizens much more than it needs to destroy dissenting elements, or the Handmaids would never have been offered the choice Offred mentions—they would have simply been destroyed as foes of Gilead’s religion.

Gilead mirrors contemporary society in ways which can and probably should discomfit readers. The comparisons are worrisome, after all. The knowledge of Gilead is worth studying, however, as both a warning and an indictment. The efficacy of the work is increased by its accuracy—though Gilead is fictional, the treatments Gilead uses are certainly not fictional and do exist in the real world. The specifics of the society are simply a combination of societal rules which are very real, albeit in very different places and cultures.

## TWO FUTURES

Margaret Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, like other works of speculative fiction, acts to shine a light upon the author's society. Unlike many other works of speculative fiction, *Woman* does so from within a framework formed by the real world. In the book, the main character, Connie, comes into contact with humans from the future, namely a person called Luciente. They both travel to her time, the 1970s in New York, and bring her back to their time in 2137, where they live in what used to be Massachusetts but has become Mattapoisett, one community of many in a peaceful, open, and seemingly utopian society. In Connie's own time, she is a patient in a mental ward which then signs her up for human experimentation which includes brain implants designed to control the human recipients. Connie also finds her way to an alternate future and meets a woman named Gildina, and learns that the future can be either a much, much worse version of the present—a version in which most humans are harvested for their organs for the immortal super-rich and live on coal from space, or Mattapoisett, which is struggling just to exist. Some question exists as to whether or not Connie actually travels through time—she is in a mental ward—but the insights she gleans from her travels are important and intriguing nonetheless. Among other things, Connie's adventures show that society has a huge impact upon the gender expression, sexuality, and even reproduction of those within the society.



One of the most immediately striking things about the society of Mattapoisett—and the other communities of its time—is the language. Though definitely English, at least in the case of Mattapoisett itself, the language changes significantly between Connie’s time in the 1970s and Luciente’s time in 2137, as could be expected in a century and a half, especially a century and a half which contain violent upheavals and complete societal reconstruction. Interestingly, however, much of the English Luciente speaks contains the signs not only of passive linguistic change but of purposeful linguistic shifts. One of the most interesting and obvious of these is the evolution of pronouns. Modern English has gendered pronouns, at least in the third person singular: she, he, it; her, him, it; hers, his, its; herself, himself, itself. Luciente’s future, on the other hand, has a genderless pronoun system: person; per; per; perself. The new, neutral pronouns take the place of the old, gendered labels: “Jackrabbit means it—person was trying to comfort you” (Piercy 119). “Person” refers specifically to “Jackrabbit” in this case. Jackrabbit happens to be male.

Pronouns are one of the most basic parts of language, and their shift makes the purpose behind the language shift more obvious. Mattapoisett’s society has different needs than Connie’s society, which is the real 1970s in the United States. As a result, they manipulate the language. Their society requires that little or no emphasis be placed upon gender as a label, and as a result, they must pay close attention to even subconsciously gendered terms and labels. Pronouns are some of the smallest units of gender in English, and some of the most commonly used. They are a subconscious, omnipresent indicator of gender. Mattapoisett must rid the language of such reminders if

they wish to ever attain a genderless society, and they must know that because that is exactly what they do. Rather than retaining outdated reminders of an old system of classification, they simply substitute another set of words without the gender connotations of the modern English pronouns.

The pronoun shift does have good reason. The people of Mattapoisett do not worry about gender assignment the way the people of Connie's time do; more than that, they have purposely chosen not to worry about gender as Connie's society does. Gender seems relatively unimportant to the society of Mattapoisett: they place slightly more emphasis on biological sex, though even that has little if any relevance to their culture. One of the future people, Parra, explains to Connie that "All coupling, all befriending goes on between biological males, biological females, or both. That's not a useful set of categories. We tend to divvy up people by what they're good at and bad at, strengths and weaknesses, gifts and failings" (Piercy 207). By categorizing people in a way other than gender and ignoring sex and gender associations, they tend to come across as androgynous in some ways. Connie takes Luciente as a male for quite a while, until finally she realizes that her new contact from the future has breasts: "She stared at Luciente. Now she could begin to see him/her as a woman" (Piercy 59). Even after the revelation, Connie struggles to place Luciente safely within her cultural gender paradigm, describing Luciente's behaviors: "Luciente spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did. She squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never

thinking about how her body was displayed” (Piercy 59). Luciente acts freely and without worrying about or obsessing over her gender role.

The way Connie describes Luciente’s motions and actions, her attitudes towards the world, even in one short snapshot, show a great deal about the contrast between the two women and the cultures in which they reside. Because Luciente’s culture does not value gender roles, she does not concern herself with them; because Connie’s makes them central to society as a whole, Connie worries about gender roles and associations. In Connie’s society, resistance to assigned roles becomes a symptom of mental disturbance or insanity. They see acceptance of assigned roles as healthy and desirable. Connie tries to act like a “model” patient by “Taking a shrewd and wary interest, volunteering for every task defined as women’s work, cleaning, sweeping, helping with the other patients, picking up clothes, fetching and carrying for the nurses” (Piercy 333). The phrase “women’s work” is key. Earlier in her stay in the hospital, she muses that “On another ward her sewing would be considered a good sign—a feminine interest in making her clothes fit would have earned her points” (Piercy 222). Women’s work and femininity—they are important elements of a gendered construct that controls the way that Connie thinks and acts and the way others perceive her.

In the dystopian future embodied by Gildina, such gender roles are taken to extremes. Gildina reveals some of the cultural ideas about women in her time: “You’re a fem too, even if you aren’t opped. They’d never pick you to time travel” (283). In Gildina’s time, women (“fems”) are obsolete. They are not trusted with anything important. They exist merely as sexual slaves. Their existence is purposeless, dull, and

unchanging. As a result, Gildina's only activities other than pleasuring her contract holder are drugs and the Sense-all, a virtual reality device that mostly plays pornography and provides full visuals and sensations. She says "My contract isn't just support either. I get enough to maintain my shots and re-ops and clothes and a little for all the Rapture and other risers I like to ream" (Piercy 284). She goes on to explain that "If it [the Sense-all] didn't cost a heart and a kidney, I'd be in it all day" (Piercy 286). The Sense-all is "like dreaming, only you're awake, and it's real exciting" (Piercy 286). Even such boredom is merely an extrapolation of contemporary, real-world trends: a psychiatrist explains that "We have made woman a sexual creature.... She has no identity except as a wife and mother. She does not know who she is herself. She waits all day for her husband to come home at night to make her feel alive" (Friedan 74-75). Boredom and desperation—in Gildina's world, they are warded off by drugs, super-television, and complete and utter ignorance and lack of imagination, as she cannot imagine a better life or even a different one, not really, not for herself.

Gildina literally cannot picture a different life for herself because there are no other options for her. As a fem, she can only do the things that fems are supposed to do, and the fems of Gildina's society are meant to fulfill the sexual needs of others and (in some cases) reproduce. There are no other options. They have starkly defined gender roles, at least for fems—the audience does not stay with Gildina long and does not learn much about the specifics of male gender roles, but it is reasonable to extrapolate from what Gildina says and the evidence in her "parment" (Gildina's language has many slurred versions of English words: a "parment" is an apartment) that they do have

different options than fems; if they would not pick “fems” for a project like time travel (Piercy 283), they could only pick some form of male, and since time travel is merely an example of a project for which a “fem” would not be chosen, they would probably not be chosen for other projects either. It also seems likely, based on the ways which women are labeled in Gildina’s society, that they are always labeled solely by their gender rather than anything else about them—for instance, their humanity (“person”) or their careers (“lawyer” or “actress”)—because they do not have any other assigned meaning within Gildina’s society. In Mattapoisett, women are defined chiefly as humans, like everyone; even in Connie’s society, women can be spoken of as human beings, though always with the lurking caveat of femininity.

Of course, gender roles are not simply about accepting one’s assigned societal worth and rank, they are about one’s actual actions. Even Connie’s society, in which women do have some roles other than the strictly, literally sexual, the list of tasks headed under “women’s work” contains no tasks with any real worth or value in the wider world: they are menial labor only, all of it housework specifically. While most if not all of the volunteering opportunities and therapies within a mental institution would have a similar lack of grand purpose or value, there might well be some that come with more import and opportunity than Connie’s options—men’s work. The differences come down to the definition and expectations of femininity; according to *The Feminine Mystique*, “women in America are not encouraged, or expected, to use their full capacities. In the name of femininity, they are encouraged to evade human growth” (Friedan 437). Humans require limitations in order to be feminine; femininity is a result of limitation. *Woman on the*

*Edge of Time* shows such limitations blatantly by introducing Gildina. The text says that “her body seemed a cartoon of femininity, with a tiny waist, enormous sharp breasts that stuck out .... Her stomach was flat but her hips and buttocks were oversized and audaciously curved. She looked as if she could hardly walk for the extravagance of her breasts and buttocks, her thighs that collided as she shuffled a few steps” (Piercy 281-282). Gildina herself, like the future she inhabits, is incredibly exaggerated. As exaggerations, her traits are not made up of whole cloth. *Woman on the Edge of Time* is speculative fiction: by definition it extends contemporary trends into the future, often to the point of extreme exaggeration. Characters like Gildina are the result of increasingly numerous and powerful experiments of the kind that Connie undergoes: one of the doctors explains that through the chip implanted in a character’s brain, “You see, we can electrically trigger almost every mood and emotion—the fight-or-flight reaction, euphoria, calm, pleasure, pain, terror! We can monitor and induce reactions through the microminiaturized radio under the skull” (Piercy 196). If nothing else, the experiments provide the preliminary research for the Sense-all which Gildina uses to kill her boredom.

Even Gildina’s description of her life is a stark reminder of the constraints inherent of femininity. She has no outlets other than drugs and full sensory pornography. There is absolutely no possibility of psychological growth or development in Gildina’s situation, unless the Sense-all does much more than described. Gildina’s only possible exposure to outside ideas would have to come from either the Sense-all, which seems unlikely, or interactions with her contract holder, which seems even more unlikely. Her contract holder has a real job (meaning, in this case, a job which is not a sexual contract)

outside their shared living space and would therefore have more opportunities to interact with the world and other people. Although their particular society would mean that he would be limited by his place in the cultural hierarchy; still, he has less restraints than Gildina. In addition, he would have no reason to share any of his outside life with Gildina, as she is a sexual servant or slave, not an equal with which he has a real relationship.

In addition to making gender roles extremely strict, Gildina's parallel future takes the obsession of sex to an art form. The Sense-all provides a selection of entertainment choices, most of which are pornographic in nature, meant only for entertainment of a sexual kind; one of them provides this description: "'When Fems Flung to Be Men': In Age of Uprisings, two fem libbers meet in battle—kung fu, tai chi, judo, wrestling. Stronger rapes weaker with dildo. SD man zaps in, fights both (close-ups, full gore), double rape, double murder, full Sense-all. HD 15" (Piercy 287). An important connection exists between Gildina and the Sense-all: they are both sex objects. Gildina is one small step up from the Sense-all itself. Pornography on a television can only be seen and heard; pornography on the Sense-all can also be felt and experienced. It is a fantasy within the control of the user. Gildina herself occupies a similar state. She effectively belongs to the person who holds her contract—Cash, in her case. She serves his sexual needs. Her whole job—her whole existence—for the length of the contract is to service the contract holder. Thus, Gildina is merely an upgrade from the Sense-all: like the Sense-all, Gildina can be felt. But the Sense-all has limited variation; programs are unchanging, like television or movies. Gildina, on the other hand, is a sex toy that can be

utilized however the contract holder wants to utilize her. She is the ultimate pornography, the ultimate aid to pleasure, a thing, not a human being, not to her contract holder or anyone else.

The sexual attitudes of all three times vary greatly. As mainstream entertainment, the *Sense-all* provides a good example of what is acceptable and even desirable within Gildina's society: basically everything sexually charged and extreme. The automatic assumption of a society that produces such entertainment might be that it is very sexually accepting and sexually open. However, the opposite is true. The man—or possibly cyborg—who enters shows that the society on the whole views sex as demeaning and savage. Gildina says he doesn't "even have the equipment" (Piercy 293), to which he replies "No appendix either.... That's why we don't need many of you useless cunts now-on. Nothing inessential. Pure, functional, reliable" (Piercy 293). They have sex, they have detailed discussion about sex—but they also see sex itself as degrading and inessential. It is a decadence to them, something that must be extreme to be worthwhile and thereby proving its worthlessness. Along with their cultural openness and frankness about sex comes a new—or at least enhanced—cultural shame and stigma about sex.

Similarly, in Connie's time, there is a great deal of open and almost grotesque focus on sexuality. Homosexuality is treated as a medical condition, more specifically as a mental health problem. Skip, in fact, is institutionalized for that very violation of societal mores—along with multiple suicide attempts. But in spite of the immediate threat to Skip's life in the form of possible suicide, the doctors focus almost solely on his homosexuality. He explains that "they ask you would you rather fly a plane or play with



dolls. Follow the stereotypes. But why should I have to pretend I'd rather watch a football game than a ballet not to be labeled queer?" (Piercy 136). Their apparently exclusive focus on Skip's sexuality indicates that it is their primary concern—either they believe that his homosexuality is the root cause of his suicide attempts, or they believe that his homosexuality is such a dangerous problem that it trumps even the loss of life.

Of course, there might be other reasons for such focus. Skip relates that "The first man I ever had sex with was an attendant at Wynmont—that's a private buzz farm they sent me to when I was thirteen" (Piercy 136). In Connie's own meeting with the doctors running the experiment for which she is chosen, she mentions that "She had noticed before that white men got off on descriptions of brown and black women being beaten" (Piercy 86). The doctors feel disdain and disgust for their patients in many ways, but for them, that disdain and disgust seems to go hand in hand with interest and possibly even arousal. Foucault explains a similar phenomenon in priests and other religious figures during other points in history. He says that "sex must not be named imprudently, but its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramifications: a shadow in a daydream, an image too slowly dispelled, a badly exorcised complicity between the body's mechanics and the mind's complacency: everything had to be told" (Foucault 1503). The doctors' interest in Skip's sexuality and in homosexuality itself has very little to do with Skip himself or even with diagnosing a patient; it has everything to do with feeding an obsession with sex and a kind of voyeurism.

The people of Mattapoisett do their therapy a bit differently, though it has its similarities as well. Perhaps because they are more sexually open as a society they feel less need to obsess over and ponder sex, at least in such a covert and deceitful manner. Instead, they focus more on relationships—primarily the nonsexual aspects of those relationships. Luciente describes her dysfunctional relationship with Diana as “the most intense mating of my life ... the fire that annealed me, as Jackrabbit says in a poem. But it was a binding, you know, we obsessed. Not good for growing. We clipped each other” (Piercy 56). Though the snippets about Luciente’s relationship never specify exactly what problems the two have, their sexuality never comes into the spotlight. Similarly, the therapy intervention Connie witnesses does not linger over the sexuality of any of the participants. Though discussions of sexuality often take place through more subtle exchanges, the nature of Mattapoisett’s intervention seems almost wholly unconcerned with physical sex; instead they discuss everything from politics to art in the context of the two people in contention. Although the source of their contention is sexual jealousy, they discuss the interpersonal relationship directly, not through hidden sexual references. One of the participants describes some of the conflict by saying that “Bolivar teases Luciente a lot, and it makes per feel silly. That’s how Bolivar pays Luciente back or punishes per or something” (Piercy 205). Rather than focusing on sexuality, Mattapoisett as a society understands that sexuality is not the most important part of life. They do not repress it until it becomes something sick and toxic. As a society, they choose instead to let it have its place, openly, and deal with interpersonal issues directly rather than through sexuality.

One of the most intriguing lines of the book comes with Luciente's explanation of the path women take to eventual freedom and equality. She tells Connie that "It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth" (Piercy 97). As with many other aspects of the book, everything entwines together: in this case, Luciente portrays sexual reproduction as the underlying motive for every other struggle for power and revolt. Most of the time, their fight stems from economic and political inequalities and abuse, but as Luciente reveals, all production inequities begin with the production of life.

Margaret Mead asks "If little boys have to meet and assimilate the early shock of knowing that they can never create a baby with the sureness and incontrovertibility that is a woman's birthright, how does this make them more creatively ambitious, as well as more dependent upon achievement?" (Friedan 211-212). Questions can act as more than merely requests for information, and this one mostly acts as an implication: Mead is concluding that men do show more ambition and are "more dependent upon achievement." While these conclusions are exactly the kind of sexist dogma that Luciente and her people are fighting, the question itself echoes her explanation. Power and fear go together in this case. Power is expressed in many ways and has many forms; notably, one of these is population: "One of the great innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of 'population' as an economic and political problem: population as wealth, population as manpower or labor capacity,

population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded” (Foucault 1507). The problem and power of population become explicit in the eighteenth century, but that does not mean that population does not hold significance prior to this point. Humans are both social and aggressive: larger groups of humans mean more powerful groups of humans. The human urge to bind oneself to others can be easy to manipulate into violence. The social group must be defended from outsiders, which requires first that there be both outsiders and insiders, and second that the “insiders” must act aggressively. Larger groups lead to greater acts of violence because when a group is large enough that not every member of the group can be recognized by every other member of the group, outsiders have even less of a chance of receiving any empathy.

Traditionally—before the technology presented in Luciente’s society, in which babies are grown in machines—only women produce offspring. As a result, women hold the key to the next generation. Their bodies decide what genes will continue and what genes will not. The consequences of such power should not come as a surprise. Matt Ridley claims that “Cuckoldry paranoia is deep-seated in men. The use of veils, chaperones, purdah, female circumcision, and chastity belts all bear witness to a widespread male fear of being cuckolded and a widespread suspicion that wives, as well as their potential lovers, are the ones to distrust. (Why else circumcise them?)” (Ridley 235). Fear often prompts displays of power, and the realities of natural reproduction can create fear. The obsessive concern with passing on one’s own genes can lead to extreme actions. Like any obsession, suddenly extreme measures seem justified in order to reach the desired goal. The reproductive drive in particular is so deep it is closer to instinct

than rational thought. The desire to pass on one's own genes has greater evolutionary fitness because a greater desire to pass on one's genes generally results in more of one's genes being passed on—as opposed to someone who is apathetic about or unwilling to pass on their own genes. So the inherent desire to reproduce is passed on and magnified throughout generations and generations of individuals with that desire fulfilling that desire.

Though the power struggles over reproductive rights likely did not start out in a conscious, purposeful attempt to subjugate others, the result is the same. The power that one group craves resides within the other group's bodies, so in order to obtain the power, they must control the bodies; the bodies also contain conscious, thinking beings who would otherwise have complete control over their own bodies; in order to control the bodies, the beings themselves must be controlled. If half the population could cure disease with a touch the results would no doubt be similar: the other half of the population would desire that power and fear its application enough to do whatever they could to control it. Luciente's point about power and equality becomes clearer: men control women in order to control the most basic form of production, which happens to produce the most basic form of social power, people themselves.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Margaret Piercy shows both the positive and negative potential of contemporary society. She also provides a clear look at the way contemporary society itself functions. By showing two futures alongside the present (now the past, but still very recognizably “present”), Piercy demonstrates the importance

of societal shifts in a number of areas. In particular, Piercy shows how society and culture impact gender, sexuality, and reproduction.

## CONCLUSION

Gender and sexuality are some of the most misunderstood and misrepresented concepts of the modern world, which is especially shameful considering how much they can and do affect all individuals. There are a number of ideas about gender and sexuality that damage people considerably today, not just emotionally, but mentally and physically. There are those who believe that certain sexual orientations, while not harmful to anyone, are actually evil or sinful or even demonic. There are those who believe that gender is a rigid construct—and those who do not believe that gender even exists, really, only that biological sex is an inescapable prophecy of personality. These are the kinds of ideas that can and have—and still do—lead to hate crimes. Even groups who back LGBT causes can end up spouting the idea that people are “born this way,” which seems like a good argument on the surface, as it would mean that conversion “therapies” are pointless and harmful, but which has negative long term consequences and is inaccurate at best and a blatant lie at worst.

While sexuality is influenced by factors that are determined before birth, they are not the ultimate determiner. There are other influences that wield even more power over sexuality and gender which factor in after birth and even after significant growth. One of these, possibly the most important, is society. Through the ideologies and social codes of a culture, the society and social environment have a significant effect upon a person's

sexuality and gender determination. While this might seem to some as an indicator that such determinations are somehow false or reversible, that is not the case. A thing does not have to be coded into the genome in order for it to be very real and very much outside of human control: gender and sexuality are fluid rather than fixed, but that does not mean that they can be changed by direct attempts at manipulation. Social influences are, in their own way, as immutable as the genetic code. The books here—*The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Woman on the Edge of Time*—all show the real power of society over gender and sexuality.

Each book returns to one point again and again—gender and sexuality are very heavily influenced by the social environment in which they develop. Significant biological similarities and differences throughout the books are heavily modified by the sheer variety of societal structures upon which the individual characters' sexualities are based. Different societies result, in each book, in greatly different sexual structures and ideologies. As all three books deal with humans and do not contain people of different species as significant characters, the different natures of sexuality and gender cannot be explained by basic biology or genetics and their complexities should not be reduced to simple explanations of biology. Though biology has its place, even in the books, society has the last word in every case.

Each tale has its own comprehension of gender and gender expression, but there are a number of ideas which appear consistently in two works if not all three, though often the same idea may be expressed differently or result in a different conclusion. All three books agree on the shifting nature of gender and its disconnect from biological sex,



but each book displays the consensus in its own way, which is part of the beauty of speculative fiction: it can not only stretch or break the limits of reality and the reader's expectations but also ignore them completely, to great effect.

The fluidity of gender is addressed many ways within the various societies showcased in the works. In *Left Hand*, it is done away with completely on the societies of the planet Gethen. While the people of Gethen do have intermittent biological sex, which is literally fluid, their gender is never tied to their sexuality because they do not have gender. It is completely disconnected from their biological sex at all times and in all cases. Even the rare exceptions to Gethenian biology—the “perverts” whose biological sex is permanent and unchanging—do not have gender, even though they have the biological sex with which readers are familiar. They do not develop gender because they are not in a society which understands or recognizes or cares about gender.

Similarly, in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, the people of Mattapoisett are unconcerned with gender. Although they do appear to have gender to some extent, it is largely ignored by the people of Mattapoisett as irrelevant. Even their language, like that of Gethen, eradicates gender pronouns completely, showing their divorce from gender on a very basic linguistic level. The people of Mattapoisett dress according to personal preference, not gender expression, and their activities, from jobs to hobbies, are similarly without bias. They even make sure that every citizen embarks on a journey to defend their society as well as mothering children: they are very careful to avoid gender by embracing all of the previously gendered activities and codes, disregarding their previous gendered connotations. In contrast, Gildina's society displays gender fluidity using a

reversed method: rather than erasing gender, Gildina's society enhances it to extreme forms. Though it is based upon biological sex and apparently rigidly enforced, their gender expression is taken to such extreme forms that biology alone is not sufficient: the people must be physically modified to suit their gender roles. Their gender shifts to accommodate society. They live in a super-gendered world.

*Handmaid* has similar conventions. The people of Gilead—or at least the women—are gendered by society. However, rather than maintaining the standard binary distinctions of “male” and “female”—and Gilead is certainly too rigid to allow for any form of trans- identities—they further divide “female” into other genders, from the eponymous Handmaids to the privileged Wives and working Aunts and even other groupings. As with Gildina's world, the gender roles and expressions of each of the female genders are rigidly enforced and go beyond any reasonable idea of freedom into gender-based slavery.

The sexualities showcased by each book display similar underlying ideas. In *Handmaid*, sex is all about power and control. Even the most basic sexual activities of their society amount to rape to some extent—but they cannot be called rape within the society because the extreme power imbalance that causes them is purposeful and desirable to those holding the reins. The sexuality of the characters is both repressed and freely used—by others. They do not control their own bodies or their own sexualities in any way—Gilead controls all of it. Even the male citizens of Gilead are sexually repressed and constrained in a variety of ways, and the female citizens' lives are reduced to their assigned sexualities.

Although readers receive a more complex look at the society of *Handmaid*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* hints at a similarly constructed society through Gildina. Gildina's role in her society is as a sexual contractor, nothing more. She provides her body—which, incidentally, is exactly what Handmaids do, although the purpose of Handmaids is reproduction, and the purpose of Gildina is to provide sexual pleasure—in return for goods, money, and security. Her body is not her own in any way. It belongs, broadly, to the multinational corporations who run her world, but also to the person who holds her contract at any given time. Her sexuality, like a Handmaid's, is both non-monogamous and completely controlled. She herself provides a stark contrast to the society of Mattapoisett which exists in an alternate timeline: in Mattapoisett, a person's body belongs to them, and they decide what to do with it and who to share it with, if anyone.

The people of Gethen described in *Left Hand* are similarly free: although they, unlike the people of Mattapoisett, do have a version of monogamy, it is neither forcibly encouraged nor strenuously avoided. The people of Gethen, moreover, are as free as the people of Mattapoisett to choose their sexual partners—though they are limited in some sense by their own biology, as a chosen partner's sexual cycle might not align properly for sexual activities. But they are not limited by their society in terms of their sexual choices, with the glaring exception of the Farm in which all prisoners are sexless due to drugs. Most Gethenian societies, however, do not interfere with the sexual options and choices of their citizenry. They are free to behave as they wish, sexually speaking, with only the limits of their own preferences to guide them.

It might seem in some ways that the societies described in the books, from Gilead to Mattapoisett to Gethen, might not apply to real life on planet Earth in the here and now because they are set in imaginary visions of strange places with strange people. The truth is that they are grounded in reality and are irrevocably tied to the real world in a variety of ways. The settings are strange because they must be in order to accomplish their authors' goals. In a work of realistic fiction, the reader can generally relax in some way: they can take for granted many things which they take for granted in real life and not worry about them needlessly. Even works of fantasy and science fiction set in mostly familiar worlds have some of the same advantage: there is enough background familiarity for the reader to settle in easily and read the story without worrying too much about basics.

Speculative fiction of the type represented by *Left Hand*, *Handmaid*, and *Woman on the Edge of Time* plays a more advanced game with the reader. Instead of allowing the reader to sit back and read without necessarily digging deeper into the text, strange works force the reader to consider the text and its implications. More than that, since the texts are so strange to the reader, they force the reader to reconsider reality and its implications; the reader must examine their own surroundings, the things they otherwise take for granted and do not question. By contrasting their own lives and experiences with something otherworldly, which they must do because the former is their only frame of reference, they not only consider the other world, but their own reality. Speculative fiction takes a reader out of their own comfort zone in order to better see and understand

that comfort zone. Good speculative fiction should make the reader uncomfortable to some extent and should always make the reader question.

Of course, the works do not leave the reader completely in the dark and lost. In each case, at least with these works, the author provides a guide to the reader, someone from a similar background with similar frames of reference. They give the reader a small mercy by way of a narrator or protagonist who asks the questions a reader needs answered. Without some relief from the otherwise unfamiliar world, the works would be a great deal more discomfiting and removed from reality. To prevent that, readers are given Genly Ai, the man from Terra; Offred, who remembers life before Gilead; and Connie, from 1970s New York. The narrators mediate these strange new worlds with worlds with which the reader can relate.

At the most basic level, literature is a form which communicates abstract ideas through concrete description. These books do so wonderfully. Perhaps most importantly, they are not talking about irrelevancies, and they are not talking about concepts divorced from the reality of human life and thought. What they are doing instead is discussing ideas central to the human condition and to life in general, as gender and sexuality are common threads throughout much of biology. They aid in understanding humanity, which is extremely important for humans; human interaction requires some understanding of humanity in general. Moreover, each of these books advocates for something, and in all three cases, it comes down to much the same thing: humans should be free to explore their gender, their sexuality, and their selves without interference from outside. The real world should stop fearing new and different gender

expressions and sexualities and embrace them as part of life and higher consciousness.

The kind of shift in attitude that they suggest could help prevent atrocities and hate crimes and improve the standards of living for many, if adapted in large numbers. These books have a message which makes them more than just entertainment (though they are that as well): it makes them worthy of discussion and understanding.

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