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ON FREEDOM IN THE TIMES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS –
A CLOSE READING OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S
THE HEART GOES LAST

Abstract

In her fifth dystopian novel, *The Heart Goes Last*, Margaret Atwood portrays North America in the not so far future, in the wake of a global economic crisis. Parts of the country are in the state of complete chaos, subjected to a ruthless gang rule. The solution to the system's breakdown comes in the form of the socio-economic experiment that requires from its participants relinquishing their freedom as every other month they will spend in prison. The seemingly preposterous experimental project enables Atwood to explore principal questions about the limits of our freedom in the times of an economic crisis or a neoliberal model of economy. The satirical form the novel takes, especially towards its end, helps the writer to decry people's over-willingness to give away their freedom and civil liberties in exchange for happy, uninterrupted consumption. The following article aims to demonstrate that the notion of freedom and free will permeate *The Heart Goes Last*, which is, in that respect, a politically and socially engaged satire.

Key words: freedom, free will, dystopia, economic crisis, pornography, Margaret Atwood.

Thirty years after a spectacular success of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Margaret Atwood published her fifth dystopian novel *The Heart Goes Last*. Though it did not necessarily overshadow her well-deserved and long-standing reputation of a primarily feminist writer, it did foreground her double status of a mainstream and speculative fiction writer. The latter genre more than any other enables the writer, who is a fervent activist, to voice her objections against the intolerable condition of today's world with regard to the violation of human rights, rampant technology, ecology, unbridled consumption or ubiquitous sur-

veillance. Speculative fiction, the term Atwood prefers over science fiction, scrutinizes the interdependence of scientific research, economy, exploitation of nature and social justice, to name but just a few. Sketching highly plausible and equally horrifying visions of possible futures, the author invites self-reflection that is of the essence if a change of attitudes is to occur. Coral Ann Howells elucidates the employed technique in the following terms:

Atwood pushes her narratives to the verge of collapse and disaster or even over the edge, and then she shifts the perspective to a wider historical context which holds out an ambiguous hope for the future. Her narratives open up space for the transformation of attitudes and policies before it is too late. Her two futuristic dystopias sweep back to the past, only to land readers squarely in the present at the end: "As I've said, I have no answers. But I've indicated some of the possibilities, some of the dangers that may lurk; some of the conundrums" (*Negotiating*, p. 108).¹

Both the masterly *Maddaddam* trilogy and the latest novel *The Heart Goes Last* draw bleak pictures of the possible futures for North America and are multi-layered critiques of the current state of affairs, to use Erich Fromm's categories, they both demonstrate the consequences for the society in which the having mode has almost entirely substituted the being mode. However, while the *Maddaddam* trilogy primarily dwells upon genetic engineering and ecological issues, *The Heart Goes Last* explores the issue of economy, governmental control and civil liberties above all. The following article aims to demonstrate that the concept of rejected freedom and discarded civil liberties permeate Atwood's latest novel, which, though set either in the not so far future or parallel present moment, is a bitter commentary on today's neoliberal society and its citizens.

In her collection of lectures *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, Atwood expands the idea of debt as an omnipresent, deep-seated life scenario few people even bother to question. Referring to Eric Berne's 1964 bestseller *Games People Play*, Atwood points to the ubiquity of the Debtor game scenario.

Berne says, "Debtor' is more than a game. In America it tends to become a script, a plan for a whole lifetime, just as it does in some of the jungles of Africa and New Guinea. There the relatives of a young man buy him a bride at an enormous price, putting him in their debt for years to come." In North America, says Berne, "the big expense is not a bride but a house, and the enormous debt is a mortgage; the role of the

¹ C. A. Howells, *Margaret Atwood*. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 187–188.

relatives is taken by the bank. Paying off the mortgage gives an individual a purpose in life.”²

For decades people of many affluent countries, The United States of America, however, topping the league, took out lifelong mortgages to buy a house or a flat. On top of that, they succumbed to the loans of all types, including credit cards, to acquire a variety of luxurious consumer goods. They could finance their life through debt. Nevertheless, when the housing bubble burst and the global financial crisis followed in its wake, the Debtor scenario was no longer a possibility. Thousands of people lost either their jobs or houses, or, in the case of the most unfortunate ones, both.

This very theme lies at the core of *The Heart Goes Last*. The action of this dystopia is set in the not so far future in North America, following a major economic crisis that converted the north eastern part of the country into a battlefield. The jobless, the homeless, the have-nots roam the cities in search for a job or food, trying to survive yet another day and escape the gangs of thieves and rapists. The life of main characters – Stan and Charmaine, once the representatives of the middle class, after the repossession of their house forced to live in their car, has literally been reduced to survival. Their world is the pre-flood world of the *Maddaddam* trilogy: pleeblands versus Compounds, the poor versus the rich. The have-nots have virtually nothing but few private possessions and freedom.

Therefore, when Charmaine discovers an advertisement for volunteers to participate in the social experiment in return for employment and accommodation in the city of Consilience, she is desperate for her and Stan to be selected and to retrieve their old comfortable middle-class life that comes with clean bedsheets and fluffy towels. Even at the cost of life-time imprisonment within the walls of the Positron Project, she cannot ignore the voice that exhorts:

Remember what your life used to be like?” says the man's voice, during the tour of the sheets and pillows. “Before the dependable world we used to know was disrupted? At the Positron Project in the town of Consilience, it can be like that again. We offer not only full employment but also protection from the dangerous elements that afflict so many at this time. Work with like-minded others! Help solve the nation's problems of joblessness and crime while solving your own! Accentuate the positive!”³

² M. Atwood, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2008, 83–84.

³ M. Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015, 26.

The experiment is supposedly to serve as a model solution to an economic crisis and high crime for other communities to follow in its footsteps. It is “a recipe for systems breakdown, right there: for anarchy, for chaos, for the senseless destruction of property, for so-called revolution, which means looting and gang rule and warlords and mass rape, and the terrorization of the weak and helpless.”⁴ The cities have turned into a battlefield, some areas controlled by gangs, others fenced off from the general public. There are too few law enforcement officers and too little money to keep the dangerous element behind bars. Hence, the Positron Project which rests upon the idea that every other month the citizens of Consilience that are provided with all bare essentials, jobs included, swap places with the prisoners of Positron corrective facility. It relies on the assumption that given a chance to lead a respectable life outside prison, but in a controlled environment of the project, inmates would rehabilitate themselves and transform into better, law-abiding citizens. Not surprisingly, the utopian plan for the integration of convicts falls through, and the worst troublemakers vanish one by one following various riots. As time goes by, both Stan and Charmaine come to realize that there is much more to that experiment than it seems. Daily propaganda delivered by Ed, the leader, instead of boosting Stan's morale and faith in the project, appears to alert him and, as a result, he commences to question the sincerity of the experiment.

The Town meeting today skips the preliminary shots of happy workers and pie charts and focuses right in on Ed, who's in full pep-talk mode. How well they are all doing with the Project tasks – beyond Ed's highest expectations! They must be so proud of their efforts and achievements, history is being made, they are a model for future towns just like theirs; indeed, there are now nine other towns that are being reconstructed according to the Consilience/Positron model⁵.

Hearing that, Stan slowly begins to dissect their model reality. Self-reflection and critical thought allow him to see cracks in the system.

Hold on, thinks Stan. What's underneath all the horn-tooting? Some folks must be making a shitload of cash out of this thing. But who, but where? Since not much of it is trickling down inside the Consilience wall. Everyone's got a place to live, true, but no one's richer than anyone else.⁶

⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁶ Ibid., 81.

He seems to be shaking off lethargy and his scales tip a little more to the side of being than having. This is the moment Stan realizes the spuriousness of Positron reality and feels that he has been lied to. Painful realization though it is, it eventually sets him free, he has a choice to either comply with the rules of the deceitful Positron project or to try to ascertain the truth. His route towards awareness echoes Fromm's description of knowing:

knowing begins with the awareness of the deceptiveness of our common sense perceptions, in the sense that our picture of physical reality does not correspond to what is "really real" and, mainly, in the sense that most people are half-awake, half-dreaming, and are unaware that most of what they hold to be true and self-evident is illusion produced by the suggestive influence of the social world in which they live. Knowing, then, begins with the shattering of illusions, with disillusionment.⁷

The disillusionment seems to lie at the very heart of *The Heart Goes Last*. In the *Guardian* article published at the time of the novel's release, under a lucid title "We are double-plus unfree", Atwood elucidates that the novel's aim is to shatter readers' illusions about the world we live in⁸ and as usual she does so by "radical questioning of contemporary social myths and fashionable ideologies".⁹ The Positron project is a microcosmic version of western reality in which citizens blindly follow the rules of rampant neoliberalism in exchange for the promise of a mortgage. Craving for safety, that is, for freedom from the dangerous element, may it be terrorists, hackers, poverty, or others, citizens have given away a multitude of their civil liberties. In one of the interviews, Atwood confirms that the total surveillance in the town of Consilience has a direct link to Bill-C-51, which she actively opposed and protested against, and which facilitated the exchange of the information about individuals by the Canadian government agencies.¹⁰

Expecting the governments to provide protection from all possible dangers and threats, citizens have granted them the right to control everyone and almost every activity, leaving little scope for privacy, let alone independent thinking. By trading civil rights for the right to consume happily, they have enslaved themselves to the system, or perhaps a number of systems they all function in simul-

⁷ E. Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* New York and London: Continuum, 2008, 33.

⁸ M. Atwood, "Margaret Atwood: we are double-plus unfree." *The Guardian* (18 Sept. 2015). Web.

⁹ C.A. Howells, op. cit., 185.

¹⁰ M. Atwood, "What Leadership Looks Like." *Canadian Business* 88.10/11 (2015): 22.

taneously, they have traded *freedom to*, the active mode, for *freedom from*, the passive mode.

In the aforementioned article, Atwood observes:

Minus our freedom, we may find ourselves no safer; indeed we may be double-plus un-free, having handed the keys to those who promised to be our defenders but who have become, perforce, our jailers. A prison might be defined as any place you've been put into against your will and can't get out of, and where you are entirely at the mercy of the authorities, whoever they may be. Are we turning our entire society into a prison? If so, who are the inmates and who are the guards? And who decides?¹¹

One does not necessarily need to be a volunteer of the Positron project like Stan and Charmaine in order to be a prisoner. Every area of responsibility and power that has been ceded to politicians or public institutions deprives people of their power to influence and shape reality, consequently, their role of active participants in the society is slowly superseded by the role of passive observers. In the course of the novel, Stan comes to realize that the chances that the government will ever cater for an individual are none. Though masked as a humanitarian solution to the economic crisis, the Positron prison is a cover-up for illegal practices and a condoned exploration of the underprivileged.

Needless to say, those who come to the aforementioned realisation in the novel are few and far between. While Stan is pondering upon the fallacy of the whole experiment, the rest of the participants seem to be satisfied and happy with their choice. They occupy themselves by doing the jobs allocated, meekly swapping their civilian clothes into prison outfits on the first day of an alternate month. They do some repair work around the co-owned house and do some potting in their co-owned garden while listening to "string quartets, Bing Crosby, Doris Day, the Mills Brothers, or show tunes from vintage Hollywood musicals"¹² since rock and hip-hop are not allowed "to avoid overexcitement".¹³ They are provided with the perfect work and life balance, the goal of many corporate workers at present. Their basic needs are met, so what else could they want? Yet, with every page it is difficult to shake off the impression that the residents of Consilience are the walking dead. Nothing depends on them since they perform the preassigned roles.

¹¹ M. Atwood, *We are double-plus un-free*, op. cit.

¹² M. Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, op. cit., 43.

¹³ Ibid., 43.

The predominant mode of the Positron residents is that of having, of gathering possessions and looking after them. It excludes the being mode since the residents lack *freedom to* and everything that comes with it. They have been granted *freedom from* but deprived of *freedom to*, they are safe but they are powerless. As Czesław Miłosz reflects in his seminal work on a communist rule, *The Captive Mind*, “Freedom from something is a great deal, yet not enough. It is much less than freedom for something.”¹⁴ The impossibility of stepping out of a predesignated role even for a moment, accompanied by total hi-tech surveillance as well as scrutiny of other project participants, slowly but steadily turns the city of Consilience into a totalitarian state. The project subverts the notion of American individualism, which many Americans still claim to cherish dearly, and substitutes it with the ideal of collectivism, whose primary aim is to boost economy and cater to the physical needs of participants but which leaves little or no space for free choice, critical thought or self-reflection. Peculiarly, though almost any struggle has been entirely eliminated from the residents' life, it seems to have backfired. Having had their material needs satisfied, the residents of Consilience are not necessarily happy. Like in Kurt Vonnegut's dystopian short story *2BR02B*, under the veneer of a perfect, successful and blissful society that is exempt from prisons, slums, insane asylums, cripples, poverty, wars, diseases, old age or death, there is the air of boredom, listlessness, and longing. This is exactly the same concoction of emotions like in Witkacy's *Insatiability*, the dystopia in which Poland is conquered by a Chinese leader Murti-Bing who controls people through pills that block independent thinking and thus the ability to resist. Miłosz describes the ambience of this novel in the following words:

The one thing that seems to deny the perfection of Murti-Bing is the apathy that is born in people, and that lives on in spite of their feverish activity. It is hard to define, and at times one might suppose it to be a mere optical illusion. After all, people bestir themselves, work, go to the theater, applaud speakers, take excursions, fall in love, and have children. Yet there is something impalpable and unpleasant in the human climate of such cities as Warsaw or Prague. The collective atmosphere, resulting from an exchange and a re-combination of individual fluids, is bad. It is an aura of strength and unhappiness, of internal paralysis and external mobility. Whatever we may call it, this much is certain: if Hell should guarantee its lodgers magnificent quarters, beautiful clothes, the tastiest food, and all possible amusements, but condemn them to breathe in this aura forever, that would be punishment enough.¹⁵

¹⁴ C. Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*. New York: Vintage Books, 1955, 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

This is exactly what befalls the city of Consilience, the collective fluid appears to be perky but individual fluids are low. If people know beforehand what their days and months to come will look like and have no control over them, despite all the activity their life seems event-less. They fall into a deep slumber, even though their personas are capable of performing daily duties. However, not all people concede to the role of passive extras in their own life and would rather do anything, including criminal acts, than experience their life through the looking glass. As Atwood observes:

Scientists tell us that rats, if deprived of toys and fellow rats, will give themselves painful electric shocks rather than endure prolonged boredom. Even this electric shock self-torture can provide some pleasure, it seems: the anticipation of torment is exciting in itself, and then there's the thrill that accompanies risky behaviour. But more importantly, rats will do almost anything to create events for themselves in an otherwise eventless time-space. So will people.¹⁶

Lacking any challenge, some residents, Stan and Charmaine inclusive, engage in sexual fantasies about their alternates, people that occupy their houses when they serve their month in prison and vice versa. An attempt at meeting your alternate, which is strictly forbidden, is the most extreme activity some project participants dare to get involved in. The face-to-face encounter with your alternate, apart from giving one a thrill, becomes a form of civil disobedience.

Notwithstanding, Consilience is not a place for the dissatisfied ones who may threaten the success of the scheme. Everything is under strict control and surveillance. Those who do not comply with the rules and regulations are branded as the incorrigibles and are furtively eliminated through lethal injection at the hands of Charmaine, who works in the Medications Administration. Though at some point she has misgivings about her job, after all she takes people's lives, she comforts herself by observing that "from all she's observed, the experience appears to be an ecstatic one. The bad part happens to her, because she's the one who has to worry about whether what she's doing is right. It's a big responsibility, and worse because she isn't supposed to tell anyone what she's actually doing, not even Stan."¹⁷ She is constantly reassured by the authorities about the indispensability of her services for, naturally, they perfectly know that it is much easier to blame it on the system than take responsibility for your actions.

¹⁶ M. Atwood, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, op. cit., 83.

¹⁷ M. Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, op. cit., 69.

To borrow Miłosz's line of thought from *The Captive Mind*, it is much easier to delegate responsibility for your actions to historical fault and necessity rather than accept their consequences as your individual fault. By condoning the death of so called reactionaries, Charmaine discards her moral values and ideals she cherished before signing in for the Positron experiment. Instead, she adopts a new faith, Ed's vision of a better organised and happy society. The mechanism of betraying your ideals for the sake of a new dogma is universal, one needs to renounce their old self and be ready to eliminate potential threats to the brave new world. Charmaine justifies the executions she carries out, neatly coined procedures, in the name of a better, more prosperous future. "I was just eliminating reactionaries that threaten the new order," she appears to be saying to herself. However, when the rumour spreads that the Consilience/Positron project is being scrutinized from the outside and that its future might be jeopardized, for a short moment Charmaine seems to be fully aware of the moral dubiousness of the system.

What if some reporter happened to find out about the Procedure? Not everyone would understand about that; they wouldn't understand the reasons for it, the good reasons. You could put a really unpleasant headline on such a story. She has a flash of herself, in a front-page photo, in her green smock, smiling eerily and holding a needle: DEATH ANGEL CLAIMS SHE SENT MEN TO HEAVEN. That would be horrible. She'd be the target of a lot of hate. But Ed won't let the reporters get in here, and thank goodness for that¹⁸.

The extent to which Charmaine is corrupted by the system becomes evident when after an initial shock and a moment of hesitation she administers the procedure to Stan, her husband. Though at first she contemplates renouncing her complicity in killing her husband and thus rebelling against the orders, soon she coldly calculates that he will be killed anyway so, all in all, she would only risk her own position and possibly even her life. In her world, free will and freedom are the luxuries that have come to be perceived as a burden. What rules Charmaine's life is fear, the apprehension of being forced to leave the safe walls of Consilience and resume her struggle to survive in the merciless outside world. The fear of prospective personal persecution, in general, prevents people from espousing the cause of the underprivileged. The sources of oppression and discrimination, however, are still numerous: gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orienta-

¹⁸ Ibid., 120.

tion are just a few. Prejudices die hard and, as Atwood bitterly observes, all too often the system itself benefits from them:

In the US, young black men are disproportionately represented in the prison population; in Canada, it's young First Nations men. Are we incapable of thinking up anything more effective and at the same time less costly, such as better education and better job creation? But maybe it serves the powers that be to foster the conditions that create scary people and have them running around, so we ourselves will see the logic of paying to lock them up.¹⁹

Once the extensive development of penitentiary system provided thousands of work places, not to mention other thousands employed in legal professions and law enforcement, it is impossible to break the vicious cycle of unnecessary detention. As costly as prisons are, especially from taxpayers' point of view, they help to sustain the job market and keep unemployment rates low. And though it is generally agreed that prison is "no longer a reformatory where criminals are to be reformed, no longer a penitentiary where they are to repent – it has become a warehouse where people are stashed,"²⁰ little is done to change it. This is the sacrifice the system is ready to make in order to make taxpayers' world a safe place. However, in the era of neoliberal economy, where everything should be regulated by the free market, more sacrifices are demanded. The unemployed, the sick, the poor should all cater for themselves outside the system for they do not contribute to it in any way. These reactionaries, for after all they pose a threat to the well-being of the system through their claims for benefits, are neoliberal society's offerings to the god of the free market. Meanwhile, the majority go on with their lives without a wink of remorse. In Atwood's view, our lack of protest, let alone outrage it should cause, stems from fear, "And fear can come in many forms: sometimes it comes down to the fear of not having a paycheck. As long as the trains run on time and you yourself are employed, why make a fuss if a few people here and there are being strung up by their thumbs?"²¹ Therefore, perhaps a reader should not be too hard on Charmaine for giving a lethal injection to her husband, for just like the vast majority, she was trying to keep her head above water.

Charmaine's administration of a deadly drug to her husband, apart from moral questions, raises naturally another issue, namely, that of love. For what is

¹⁹ M. Atwood, *We are double-plus unfree*, op. cit.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

love in the era of sexual freedom, disposability and omnipresent pornography? The three epigraphs that precede the novel are: an excerpt depicting Pygmalion's creation of Galatea from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a newspaper clipping from a science fiction website, *Gizmodo*, that describes a sex doll, and a fragment of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* about the parallel between lovers and madmen, respectively. Such a concoction of quotations successfully encompasses the complex notion of love in the contemporary world that frequently boils down to the commodification of another person. Lovers like madmen engage in fantasies that have little to do with reality and real people, like Pygmalion, they imagine their Galateas to be someone else, even though it is not always a conscious mechanism. Bringing in past and all past selves into a relationship, people are incapable of seeing their partner for who they really are. In order to fulfil their deepest psychological needs, people seek for partners that will help them act out prescribed scenarios. Such is the case of Stan and Charmaine, who, despite their reassurances of mutual love, seem to be if not unhappy than at least completely bored with each other. Charmaine, who had a troubled family background, strives to keep up appearances of marital bliss and Stan being the best choice she could have made. Unlike Max, her lover and alternate at Consilience, with whom she has a passionate and "dirty" kind of sex, Stan provides her with the sense of stability and security.

She did love Stan, but it was different. A different kind of love. Trusting, sedate. It went with pet fish, in fishbowls—not that they had one of those—and with cats, perhaps. And with eggs for breakfast, poached, snuggled inside their individual poachers. And with babies.

Once Grandma Win had died, Charmaine had to make her own way; it had been thin ice with the cracks showing and disaster always waiting just beneath her, but the trick was to keep gliding. She loved Stan because she liked solid ground under her feet, non-reflective surfaces, movies with neat endings.²²

When with Stan, Charmaine acts out the script of a decent and slightly uptight wife who dreams of a perfect home and family and does not allow herself to let go in her marital bedroom. She is fond of her husband and their past but she is not passionate with him; Charmaine has settled for Stan. The reasons for her choice may be manifold, she could have done so in order to survive in the dog-eat-dog world but perhaps also to avoid the risk of getting involved in

²² M. Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, op. cit., 53.

a toxic relation in which she could easily be exploited or taken advantage of due to her childhood experiences. The fact that she is drawn to a domineering type of a lover is revealed through her lascivious affair with Max, who forces her to step in the role of a slut, with which she meekly complies. On the other hand, the unsatisfactory condition of her marriage may simply result from a much more common cause of a marital break-down, namely, ceasing to care for each other and taking each other for granted. Love, which is always an active mode, over time is frequently superseded by ownership, which, for a contrast, always implies a passive mode. Fromm recounts this process in the following terms:

The marriage contract gives each partner the exclusive possession of the other's body, feelings, and care. Nobody has to be won over any more, because love has become something one has, a property. The two cease to make the effort to be lovable and to produce love, hence they become boring, and hence their beauty disappears. They are disappointed and puzzled. ... Now, instead of loving each other, they settle for owning together what they have: money, social standing, a home, children. Thus, in some cases, the marriage initiated on the basis of love becomes transformed into a friendly ownership, a corporation in which the two egotisms are pooled into one: that of the "family."²³

Though Charmaine seems to lack this realisation, Stan seems to be perfectly aware of this mechanism. When watching the sex tapes of Charmaine and her lover, he ponders, "How long will it take for the two of them to get bored, then fed up with each other?"²⁴ He thinks of metaphoric "dirty socks" and "hairs in the sink," which apparently, in his view, are an inevitable future of every romantic relationship that goes on for too long.

The Heart Goes Last, however, has a remedy to this imminent boredom, namely, a brain operation that allows you to attach to someone permanently, with your love never waning. Naturally, since the operation is in its experimental phase, some women from the Positron project are subjected to it as guinea pigs against their will. As mistakes are bound to take place, one of the characters falls in love with her teddy bear, which is so Atwoodian a trait. The nature of that experiment and its rationale is elucidated in the following dialogue between Stan and Budge, who is an expert in sex robots:

²³ E. Fromm, op. cit., 38.

²⁴ M. Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, op. cit., 101.

"Let me put it to you," says Budge. "Suppose you could customize a human being through a brain procedure."

"How do you mean?" says Stan.

"They use lasers," says Budge. "They can wipe your attachment to anyone previous. When the subject wakes up she imprints on whoever's there. It's like ducklings."

"Holy crap," says Stan.

"So, shorthand: choose a babe, give her the operation, stick yourself in front of her when she's waking up, and she's yours forever, always compliant, always ready, no matter what you do. That way nobody feels exploited."²⁵

Putting aside the moral issues such an enslavement raises, another question that emerges here is people's willingness to be in such a relationship. The aforementioned scenario is the most extreme version of the having mode in a relationship one can imagine since the actual partner does not exceed the role of a sex doll or a sexbot; it is based on the total commodification of a human being. But then, on the other hand, perhaps it should not cause such an outrage in the society in which sexual freedom often verges on violation of others.

Just as one of the epigraphs to the novel announces it, pornography business is taken under scrutiny, but in a typical Atwoodian style. Elvis and Marilyn sexbots that cater to the needs of the masses and occasionally get jammed or go awry are produced at the premises of Conscience along with *kiddybots* that are "dressed in the white nighties or the flannel pjs" and are "boxed in flannelette sheets, and each one has a bear tucked into the package for extra-realistic effect."²⁶ Few writers have such a satirical talent that despite provoking choking laughter they manage to raise true terror in the reader who begins to wonder if *kiddybots* fit into the category of our right to sexual freedom or if they are an egregious violation. When outraged Stan protests against the notion of *kiddybots*, he is told that they are in high demand and, in the times of economic crisis, the possibility of making big money cannot be discarded. Moreover, the producers believe "these bots are sparing real kids a whole lot of pain and suffering."²⁷

Child pornography as well as underage prostitution is the issue which Atwood previously explored in *Oryx and Crake* through the character of Oryx, an Asian woman that was sold by her mother to work as a child sex slave. The questions this subplot posed, and that are eerily echoed in *The Heart Goes Last*, force the reader to reconsider the notion of freedom. Obviously, sexual exploita-

²⁵ Ibid., 204.

²⁶ Ibid., 201.

²⁷ Ibid., 202.

tion of minors is a blatant violation of their freedom but pornography viewers are far from being free, too. In the era of ubiquitous pornography and ever increasing sexualization of advertising industry, it is virtually impossible to determine whether the industries cater to customers' needs or whether they actually create the demand themselves. Once more, the free market has the upper hand, the amount of money pumped into and out of pornography is too great for the industry to curb its practices regardless of moral objections. "Jobs are stake," says one of the *kiddybots* manufacturers, "Folks out there have bills to pay."²⁸ In neo-liberalism, it seems, a financial argument tips all the scales. Radical hedonism appears to have prevailed and stayed put, which is most regrettable in the face of other philosophical options humanity has been offered:

Many ethical theories have been developed since the eighteenth century—some were more respectable forms of hedonism, such as Utilitarianism; others were strictly anti-hedonistic systems, such as those of Kant, Marx, Thoreau, and Schweitzer. Yet the present era, by and large since the end of the First World War, has returned to the practice and theory of radical hedonism.²⁹

The pursuit for happiness ranks so high that some would rather live a lie than be unhappy. This is the case of Charmaine upon her reunion with Stan, who, in the course of comedy of errors that the novel turns into at a certain point, was not administered the lethal injection, all in all. In order to help boost their relationship and overcome her obsession with Max, her lover, Charmaine undergoes the aforementioned brain adjustment. Things appear euphoric between her and Stan, as if they were in the honeymoon phase again. However, as a wedding gift (for they marry again) she receives the peculiar gift of truth, namely, she learns that she was never subjected to any brain surgery. Strangely, it does not come as good news to her because once again she is forced to take responsibility for her own choices. She is more free but she is not any happier, to the contrary. Her initial protest is expressed in the following terms: "This isn't fair. Everything was all settled!"³⁰ to which Jocelyn, the character that breaks this sensational news to Charmaine, responds:

"Nothing is ever settled," ... "Every day is different. Isn't it better to do something because you've decided to? Rather than because you have to?"...

²⁸ Ibid., 202.

²⁹ E. Fromm, op. cit., 4.

³⁰ M. Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, op. cit., 305.

“You prefer compulsion? Gun to the head, so to speak?” ... “You want your decisions taken away from you so you won't be responsible for your own actions? That can be seductive, as you know.”³¹

As this is the very last scene, it reiterates the underlying tone of the whole novel, namely, that of freedom and free will. Charmaine seems to be terrified by the notion of free will and the consequences of one's choices. She wants “to be free of the prickling sensation in her gut that tells her she'll never be completely satisfied” because “human urges will forever be governed by a more incalculable rule: The allure of the new, or of the semblance of the new” and “may well be irresistible.”³² Therefore, once the honeymoon phase passes again, Charmaine will have to make a conscious effort to sustain that relationship on a daily basis despite dirty socks and hairs in the sink, she will be forced to choose Stan every time “a shadow of Max. A Max-like person”³³ crosses her way. The prospects of that happening terrify her for she would prefer to be bound to Stan for good through the brain procedure, without the necessity to practice her freedom of choice. Charmaine's reluctance to take responsibility for her actions and her unwillingness to draw a lesson from her stay in the Positron project are the elements which give this otherwise truly hilarious novel a depressing undertone. For if, as Paul De Man coins it, “freedom is man's will to change,”³⁴ than Charmaine is definitely unfree.

Thankfully, the novel features also some more uplifting characters than Charmaine, one of them being Jocelyn, presumably Charmaine's doppelgänger. Working as the high ranking officer in the upper echelons of power and being the actual founding mother of the experiment, Jocelyn is forced to hide her misgivings about the Positron project at work. Seeing their utopian plan going awry, she is one of few characters that take responsibility for their mistakes and try to fix it. Unlike the vast majority of the characters featured in the novel, she seems to value freedom and civil liberties above all and, therefore, intends to reveal the true corrupt face of the Positron project. “Do you believe in free will?”³⁵ she asks Stan, who is completely taken aback by her inquiry and suspects it might be a trap. Posing that question, Jocelyn challenges the notion most people take for granted. Though people claim to cherish freedom and free will

³¹ Ibid., 306.

³² S. Gilbert, “Unliberated Sex.” *Atlantic*, 316 (4) 2015, 54.

³³ M. Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, op. cit., 306.

³⁴ P. De Man, *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979, 140.

³⁵ M. Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, op. cit., 119.

dearly, their way of life frequently seems to contradict this view. As Lawrence M. Friedman notes in *The Horizontal Society*:

choice is often an illusion. People are firm believers in free will. But they choose their politics, their dress, their manners, their very identity, from a menu they had no hand in writing. They are constrained by forces they do not understand and are not even conscious of. But even the illusion of choice is of enormous social significance.³⁶

Inviting reflection on the notion of choice, Atwood prompts the reader to ask themselves if they truly have access to all the information, choices and options available or perhaps these have already been narrowed down by external forces. *The Heart Goes Last* encourages the reader to stop and think to what extent citizens let different institutions, corporations, or politicians make decisions for them and free themselves from decision making.

At some point in the story, Stan repents his signing in to the prison experiment in the words that echo Friedman's observations:

He shouldn't have let himself be caged in here, walled off from freedom. But what does freedom mean any more? And who had caged him and walled him off? He'd done it himself. So many small choices. The reduction of himself to a series of numbers, stored by others, controlled by others. He should have left the disintegrating cities, fled the pinched, cramped life on offer there. Broken out of the electronic net, thrown away all the passwords, gone forth to range over the land, a gaunt wolf howling at midnight. But there isn't any land to range over any more. There isn't any place without fences, roadways, networks. Or is there?³⁷

Through imagining himself living in the wilderness, on the margin of the society, Stan evokes the spirit of great American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau and his *Walden* with the memorable line: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately."³⁸ According to transcendentalists, the road to greater self-awareness and mindfulness leads through contact with nature and recognition that human beings are just one more element of the intricate ecosystem and their lives are entirely dependent on many of the ecosystem's features. In the *Maddaddam* trilogy, the only way to survive was through restoring the link with nature and learning its ways anew, which was the aim of God's

³⁶ L. M. Friedman, *The Horizontal Society*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, 240.

³⁷ M. Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, op. cit., 151.

³⁸ H. D. Thoreau, *Walden*. The Project Gutenberg, 1995. Web.

Gardeners, the equivalent of a modern day grassroots movement. Per chance Stan's future will not be as dramatic as those that survived the Waterless Flood nor does he have to build a cabin in the woods to restore his freedom, nonetheless, he needs to practice his rights as a citizen more often, especially his right to object to unfair and exploitative laws that lead to the commodification of human beings and other species, too.

Four decades ago, in *To Have or to Be*, Erich Fromm diagnosed the pivotal problem of the discussed novel, that is, as citizens we are subjected to manipulations beyond our recognition. "The dream of being independent masters of our lives ended when we began awakening to the fact that we have all become cogs in the bureaucratic machine, with our thoughts, feelings, and tastes manipulated by government and industry and the mass communications that they control."³⁹ If that was an issue forty years ago, how much more advanced that manipulation and control are nowadays with the worldwide web, satellite communication and voracious advertising machine.

To conclude, apart from pillorying the economic situation and system, Atwood as usual denigrates people's willingness to give away their personal freedom without a wink of remorse. The promise of prosperity that neoliberalism makes is exclusive of so many classes of people that it should hardly be seen as a fair economic system. Focused on paying off mortgages and acquiring consumer goods, people forget the essence of life that, according to Ruth Nanda Anshen, "consists in the tension which connects spirit with the realm of matter, symbiotically joined."⁴⁰ The acquisition of goods seems to have superseded basic needs and led people to believe that they are what they have. Personal growth and development are only welcome if they enable individuals to climb up a career ladder, and thus, obtain even more goods. Ignorant of the price that they pay in order to consume happily, namely, restricted freedom and increased surveillance, citizens enable the systems – political, economic, social to continue without a change, without taking into account a human factor. For as Charmaine notes, "citizens were always a bit like inmates and inmates were always a bit like citizens".⁴¹ The struggle that the residents of North America should be truly concerned about is the broadening gap between the rich and the poor, the prevalence of the having mode over being mode, as Fromm would phrase it.

³⁹ E. Fromm, op. cit., 2.

⁴⁰ In E. Fromm, op. cit., xii.

⁴¹ M. Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, op. cit., 145.

In the final lines of the novel, having revealed the truth to Charmaine about not subjecting her to brain adjustment operation, Jocelyn exhorts, "Take it or leave it. I'm only the messenger. As they say in court, you're free to go. The world is all before you, where to choose."⁴² It is difficult to shake off the feeling that this is in fact Atwood releasing her reader from the novel, having forced them to face the thinly disguised intolerable condition of today's world. Though like Jocelyn she does not impose anything, as a writer representing engaged humanities Atwood felt compelled to deliver this despondent message to her readers. The choice is up to them whether to start to live more consciously or do nothing but put the novel aside.

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⁴² Ibid., 306.