Imagining Otherwise: Atwoodian Dystopias, Gender, and Narrative Imagination

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Abstract: This contribution examines how fiction can foster both imaginative engagement and critical reflection on social structures. I focus on (1) narrative imagination, as conceptualized by M. Nussbaum, i.e., the capacity to enter the experiences of others through literature, and (2) utopia/dystopia, understood as a narrative experiment that imagines "what could be otherwise." Looking into segments of Margaret Atwood's utopian/dystopian works (*The Handmaid's Tale* and the first part of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, *Oryx and Crake*), I investigate how Atwood's works cultivate empathy while simultaneously prompting critical reflection on power, oppression, and social inequality. Atwood's characterization of her novels as "speculative" rather than science fiction, grounded in extrapolations from existing realities, might encourage readers to more easily connect the imaginative scenarios with their own moral and social worldviews. I foreground selected moments that bring gendered power dynamics into sharper view. I also engage with critiques of narrative imagination that highlight both its limitations and its potential to reproduce, rather than disrupt, existing social hierarchies. This is why I introduce the concept of posthumanist reading as a way to move beyond humanism and anthropocentrism, and as a suggestion for rethinking interpretative practices through a decentred, more-than-human perspective. A further dimension of this reflection is its pedagogical application. I explore how Atwood's work can be incorporated into classroom practice across literary and civic education. Key questions include: how can students be encouraged to inhabit the experiences of women living under patriarchal or otherwise oppressive structures? How does imaginative engagement with dystopian worlds challenge readers' ethical, political, and gendered understandings? What are the benefits and challenges of teaching gender through utopian/dystopian literature? I conclude by positioning Atwoodian dystopias as a compelling site for exploring the interplay of narrative strategies and social possibilities.

Keywords: Utopia/dystopia, Narrative imagination, Posthumanist reading, Gender, Margaret Atwood, Education

1. Introduction: Alignments of the Text

My contribution is situated at the intersection of gender and literary studies, examining how works of fiction can foster both imaginative engagement and critical reflection on social structures. I am particularly interested in the relationship between narrative imagination, as conceptualized by Martha Nussbaum (2003), and (2) utopia/dystopia, understood as a narrative experiment that imagines "what could be otherwise." Narrative imagination is defined here, in short, as the capacity to inhabit the experiences of others through literature, to empathize with them, and to envision alternative social worlds. Central to this inquiry is the question of how these two frameworks might intersect with gender and contribute to the critique and reconfiguration of social norms.

To illustrate that, I aim to draw upon some of the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's dystopian works, among which the most well-known are: *The Handmaid's Tale*, with its sequel *The Testaments*, and the *MaddAddam* trilogy, consisting of *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood,* and *Maddaddam*. I will dedicate most attention to the first two novels from each body of work, that is, *The Handmaid's Tale* (hereafter THT) and *Oryx and Crake* (OAC). I see Atwood's work and Atwoodian dystopias as a persuasive site for exploring the interplay of gender, narrative strategies, and social possibilities. It is particularly relevant how Atwood plays with ambivalence, meaning that there is no simple utopia; instead, she shows dystopian control and hints of alternative futures.

Atwood's narrative strategies cultivate empathy while simultaneously prompting critical reflection on power, oppression, social inequality, and, last but not least, show how the uses and abuses of science alter our social worlds, even our humanity, and human-ness. As regards the latter, her *MaddAddam* trilogy envisions a post-anthropocentric world that raises questions about the kind of humanity we are moving toward, the role of scientific explorations, and the extent to which we must remain humane. Together, THT and its sequel, *The Testaments*, and the *Maddaddam* trilogy, "represent a synthesis of her political, social, and environmental concerns" (Howells, 2006a).

Especially, but not exclusively, due to the environmental issues I introduce the concept of posthumanist reading, which on one hand complements the concept of narrative imagination, and, on the other, carries a critique of it, as it expands the reader's empathy into the realm of "'solidarity with the non/human' (i.e., with both humans and nonhumans and their mutual rearticulations)" (Herbrechter, 2025). This means stepping away from humanism and androcentrism into the realm of entanglements with the nonhuman (animal, machine,

environment) and, more importantly, into feminist research that has for quite some time deconstructed the idea that Man is the measure of all things.

A further dimension of this reflection is its pedagogical application. I am interested in how Atwood's work can be incorporated into classroom practice, both in literary education and in civic education. Some of the key questions could be: how can students be encouraged to inhabit the experiences of women living under patriarchal oppressive structures? How does imaginative engagement with dystopian worlds challenge readers' ethical, political, and gendered understandings? What are the benefits and challenges of teaching through utopian/dystopian literature, particularly at a time when "the separation between science-fictional visions of virtual futures and our social reality is becoming more difficult to uphold" (Braidotti, 2019)? This does not hold only for the impact of technological advances on humans, but is also appropriate in other society-related contexts.

In other words, as put by Atwood herself in the context of writing OAC, but all too relevant for our gendered worlds and women's rights: "Trends derided ten years ago as paranoid fantasies had become possibilities, then actualities" (Atwood, 2005). The question: *Is anyone going to believe this?* (Atwood, 2011), related to the writing of THT, seems somewhat erroneous in light of the continuous push to withdraw or minimize the reproductive rights of women. The same is equally apparent in the case of environmental issues.

2. Clarifications: on SF with Atwood and Haraway

First, I would like to turn to (1) the title of my contribution and (2) the acronym SF. The latter usually stands for "science fiction", but we will look into other possibilities, with the help of Margaret Atwood, the writer, and Donna Haraway, the cyborgian theoretician (among other things). This will help us to better articulate our "imagining otherwise" and to outline possible approaches to the educational process, while also addressing the question of how and why SF can contribute to it.

First to the title. To those familiar with Atwood's work, it is clear that the worlds she depicts are harsh and ruthless, but not for all, not for the privileged minority. It may be that one person's dystopia is another one's utopia. I am aware that this treatment of the subject is somewhat preliminary. For example, in THT, handmaids, women of childbearing age, are totally powerless in a totalitarian patriarchal Republic of Gilead. They are forced to produce children for the ruling class of Commanders, and that is all they are allowed to do. They are denied any other agency. The Commanders, on the other hand, are obviously having the time of their lives. It is about the same fictional coin with two different sides.

That is why Atwood has coined the word "ustopia", which is the imagined perfect society and its opposite, "each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood, 2011). Atwood explains it thus: "[…] dystopia contains within itself a little utopia and vice versa. What, then, is the little utopia concealed in the dystopic THT? There are two: one is in the past – the past that is our own present. The second is placed in a future beyond the main story" (Atwood, 2011), the future being the one when the tyrannical republic of Gilead and its patriarchal control of women has ended.

Another example could be from OAC. This time, this is a biotechnology-ruled (and maybe not-so-far-away) future where genetic modifications of biological beings are quite common, and to the advantage of the privileged and segregated community. But the apocalypse that happens changes things drastically. Neither the pre-apocalyptic society governed by total surveillance nor the post-apocalyptic one, in which most of the population has been wiped out by a human-made virus, can be described as particularly utopian, at least not for the deprivileged majority.

I cannot go into more detail as to the typology of "-topias" – there are heterotopias, anti-utopias, eutopias, and so on. What I would like to touch on is the question of whether ustopias are more a part of science fiction or speculative fiction. Atwood is decisive on this point. She characterizes her work as speculative fiction. The difference between the two, in her opinion, is that the former is about things we cannot do (yet), and the latter is about employing the means more or less at hand (Atwood, 2022). I find Atwood's definition pertinent and handy, though it is not unanimously valid. Differences are above all found in the part about the things "at hand". For example, Sarah Truman refers to speculative fiction's freedom to imagine entities such as a dog with wings (Truman, 2018), a suggestion that clearly diverges from Atwood's narrative and conceptual framework.

Everything presented in THT had already been done by humankind, although not at the same time (for more, see, e.g., Atwood, 2011). Many of the scientific applications of the *Maddaddam* trilogy are present today and were well researched by Atwood before writing the trilogy (the novels were published in 2003, 2009, and 2013,

if you want to make a comparison with the actual technological advances). It is a pick on existing potentialities and an extrapolation based on "things that really could happen but [haven't] completely happened" or the "seeds of what might become the future" (Atwood, 2011). This perspective helps consider why science fiction may constitute an important component of civic education.

Donna Haraway takes the acronym play of SF further. SF, she writes, is science fiction, speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fact, among others (Haraway, 2016). What is particularly salient is Haraway's definition of SF: "SF is storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come (Haraway, 2016). This aligns well with Atwood's work and her perspective on the possibilities opened for humans to embark on (or not).

As put by Atwood, clarifying the famous "what if" motto of some of her works: "What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?" (Atwood, 2005). Indeed, how slippery is the slope? There has been some dissent about which slippery slope Atwood had in mind: either consumerism, where everything is reduced to a commodity, including nature, animals, and so on; or the environmental question, female discrimination, and (bio)ethical concerns (Mosca, 2013). I do not think it is either-or, but both, with bioethical concerns at the forefront, which, in turn, cannot be separated from consumerism or the interests of capital.

All the meanings of SF, described by Haraway, are relevant and interconnected: story and fact, possibility and actuality, present and future. One of the central points to stress is that SF is, in fact, about the present – about what troubles us now and where we imagine ourselves to be heading. "Crucial to dystopia's vision in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives of everyday people. Again and again, the dystopian text opens in the midst of a social 'elsewhere' that appears to be far worse than any in the 'real' world" (Moylan, 2000). It is, as one might say, a cautionary tale. Perhaps the primary function of a dystopia, states Coral Ann Howells (2006a) "is to send our danger signals to its readers".

Considering these two bodies of Atwood's work raises questions in at least two areas: the societal and gendered, and the scientific and humane. Atwood has moved "through political and social satire to satire against mankind", says Howells (2006b), and claims that the dystopian vision has darkened. It is hard to evaluate that, unless, of course, the possible end of humanity eradicates all other evils, among them, the rights denied to half of humanity. There is, of course, a significant difference between a dystopian narrative told by a marginalized woman (Offred in THT) and one by a man (Jimmy, later nicknamed Snowman, in OAC), who is, presumably, the Last Man alive (Howells, 2006a). I say presumably, because it later turns out this is not the case, but that is another story, namely the story of *The Year of the Flood*. Incidentally, OAC breaks the Atwoodian line of female protagonists (Offred of THT, of course, included) and employs a primary male protagonist (Jimmy) (Tolan, 2007).

Both bodies of Atwood's work raise the question of what it means to be human and where our humanity lies. This is not the question only at the core of OAC, which is "in many ways, simply a broadening of the earliest feminist investigations into gender and essentialism" (Tolan, 2007). Underlying THT, there is also an interrogation of the "generic human" of humanism, which, as we now well know, excludes all sorts of "human others", although allegedly speaking in a "unified voice" for all of them.

3. How to Approach Possible Worlds: Reading Otherwise

In this part, I would like to look into the possibilities of "reading otherwise". That is why I chose to introduce and, to a certain extent, compare two concepts:

1. Martha Nussbaum's narrative imagination, rooted in humanism and the idea of shared humanity. Narrative imagination is an anthropocentric model grounded in empathy and rational moral agency. For Nussbaum, narrative imagination cultivates the ethical capacity to see the world from perspectives other than one's own, fostering empathy and civic responsibility. Literature, in her opinion (basing on Aristotle), is "more conducive to general human understanding" because it "acquaints us with 'the kind of things that might happen,' general forms of possibility and their impact on human lives" (Nussbaum, 2003). She, in short, opts for the development of the world citizens and warns against the spirit of identity politics (I must leave aside the question of how extensive self-knowledge can be.)

Yet there are some cautions against taking this claim at face value. Empathy does not automatically lead to political transformation, attempts to imaginatively "know" the other risk appropriating or simplifying the other's

experience. It connects to the classical humanist stance. The focus lies in another *human's* perspective. In the words of Rosi Braidotti: "humanistic Man — as the universal measure of all things — defined himself as much by what he excluded as by what he included in his rational self-representation (Braidotti, 2016).

2. Stefan Herbrechter's somewhat less humanistic-oriented posthumanist reading. I say "less" because posthumanism does not exclude human; it does, however, deny them a central position on the world's stage. Posthumanism is not about a chronological progression; it both transgresses (not discards) and includes humanism, as the prefix "post-" implies. So, it is not a break with humanism, but a rethinking of epistemological and ontological questions related to "being human" (Pedersen, 2010), about moving forward, thereby exposing humanism's (many) contradictions.

To read in a posthuman way, write Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus (2008), is "to read against one's self, against one's own deep-seated self-understanding as a member or even representative of a certain 'species'. It is already to project an otherness to the human [...]." The question is whether this "against one's self" poses an impossibility if taken to the letter, but we must insist on its being (Herbrechter and Callus, 2008).

The important thing is that they both value imagination as crucial for ethical reflection of us humans. They both try to move beyond self as the centre of understanding the world, beyond self-centeredness, whether of the individual or the human. Whereas narrative imagination steps into "another's shoes" (i.e., another human being's), posthumanist reading attempts to reach beyond human and humanist imagination. Whereas the first stresses "our common humanity", the second inquires into possibilities to go beyond that.

Moira Von Wright, basing her reflection on Hannah Arendt's work (Von Wright, 2002), says that although we are always trapped within our subjective selves, and although it might appear that we cannot (or hardly ever) take a position outside ourselves, it is possible to think "with an enlarged mentality", taking into account the perspective of others and their circumstances. This means to train one's imagination to go visiting (Arendt, 1992, in Von Wright, 2002). Or, in the words of Martha Nussbaum (2003), go on a fictional exercise of imagination.

But both readings have their own flaws or lacks. Perhaps the greatest of the number one is that it is based on universalism and anthropocentrism, thus putting (only) the human into the forefront. While I fully acknowledge the importance of striving to understand our shared humanity and vulnerability, I question the assumption that such awareness is easily achieved and that it naturally translates into compassion. Compassion, says Nussbaum (2003), "requires demarcations which creatures am I to count as my fellow creatures, sharing the possibilities with me?" And this is debatable, not only from the human point of view (do I care for the situation of women?), but also from the posthumanist point of view (do I see animals as actors in an anthropocentric world?).

The number two could be criticised on the same grounds as number one, but from a reverse angle: of not putting humans in the forefront *enough*. If everything (machines, animals, environments) is agentic, the specific moral responsibility and accountability of humans may be blurred. This is especially, but not exclusively, troubling in the case of, e.g., gender-based violence or discrimination. Also, there is colonial dispossession, environmental disregard, class exploitation, and the like. In these cases, it is humans who clearly benefit, harm, dominate, or oppress.

So, agreed, decentering the human too quickly can erase the specific histories of oppression and dilute the political specificity of human suffering. On the other hand, the staple of posthumanist thinking is not "to 'overcome' the human but to challenge its fundamental humanism, including its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings and allies (e.g., anthropocentrism, speciesism, universalism)" (Herbrechter and Callus, 2008).

I would suggest, at least for the time being, that we strike a critical balance between humanistic empathy and posthumanist skepticism. Or, that we understand posthumanist readings as a sort of necessary extension of the narrative imagination reading, which traces connections across species and technologies. An attempt should be made to bridge those two concepts and so make a tentative link between the human-centered stories and posthumanist concerns that human-centeredness is not enough.

To be responsive to the posthuman condition is to "acknowledge our unavoidable interconnectedness with non-humans, including inanimate objects. Importantly, acknowledging the non-humans does not mean to stop caring about people" (Monforte, n.d). This is the door through which nonhuman actors may enter, potentially guiding us toward the pursuit of "multispecies ecojustice" (Haraway, 2016). Not only are identification and moral sensitivity taking place, but also the awareness of relationality, power, and entanglement with the nonhuman.

This is thin ice, and I am aware of it as literature, as put by Stefan Herbrechter (2025), "is a humanist institution whose main purpose either explicitly or implicitly has always been to show a human reader what it is to be

human". In the case of a posthumanist reading (not the literature of the posthuman!), one "tries to identify, analyse and emphasise those 'moments' in texts that challenge and/or (re)confirm humanist assumptions" (Herbrechter, 2025). At the same time, we must foreground human responsibility, as power relations with nonhuman agents remain profoundly asymmetrical, and traditional hierarchies of being persist.

Atwood's work could be placed precisely between the two paradigms, the narrative imagination perspective and posthumanist readings. Atwood is perfect for exploring this tension, especially in gendered violence and biopolitical control. We could trace the narrative line from Nussbaum's humanist empathy (gender oppression) towards a posthumanist ethics of entanglement (pre- and postapocalyptic dystopias).

4. How to Inhabit the Experiences of Others: Imagining Otherwise in the Classroom

Let us look at some examples of how to approach Atwoodian universes in the educational process. Importantly, when focusing on the content, I certainly suggest not losing the aesthetic dimension and the narrative techniques of the text from sight altogether. But, at the same time, in reference to Nussbaum, it needs to be understood that aesthetic experience is not enough, if that means the detachment from civic and political concerns (Nussbaum, 2003).

Teaching gender through utopian/dystopian literature could be quite an influential pedagogical strategy. Such works (let us name them SF, no matter how we understand the acronym, see above) are inherently experimental, boundary-testing, and opening the way to transgressions.

Both THT and OAC engage with gender roles through biological frameworks, among other dimensions. In the first, women's roles are pushed to the extreme – they are made "walking uteruses"; in the second, the Crakers, a new human race, are bioengineered to have all the human "flaws" removed. Their reproduction is technical and devoid of any human emotions. Students realize that the seemingly familiar and taken-for-granted things are, in fact, strange indeed.

This is the way to go on a thought experiment of "what if": what if things were different, what kind of consequences would that bring, etc.? What if women's worth would only lie in their fertility, as in the case of Handmaids of THT, or in their use for domestic labour, as is the case with Marthas of THT? Both categories of women, together with Wives, who are of higher status, exist only in relation to men.

A narrative imagination perspective would then encourage empathy with women under patriarchy, whereas a posthumanist reading would expose systemic control of bodies and reproductive technologies.

The next step would be to pose the question of what gender looks like and how it can be changed. Students can see that gender norms are contingent. So herein lies the possibility of envisioning alternatives, at the same time, thinking of real-world gender issues, such as patriarchy and reproductive control, but looking at them through a fictional distance. This would entail at least touching upon feminist theory, biopolitics, posthumanism, etc. Ideally, it would connect to other curricular areas, such as civic education. For example, one could expose the fragility of rights – they are not guaranteed and not won once and for all. Rights we take for granted can disappear quite quickly, under the guise of security or crisis response.

To take the matter further, we might introduce intersectional issues and demonstrate that gender-based control and violence are never isolated phenomena; rather, they intersect with class (Marthas in THT and the poor living in an environmentally devastated pleeblands in OAC), technology, the environment, and other factors, depending on whether our reading is human-centered or posthumanist.

5. Conclusion

I tried to position Atwoodian ustopias as a generative site for exploring the entanglement of gender, narrative, and social possibility. I tried to make a case for both Atwood's work being used in the classroom and for the themes she investigates being explored further. I contend that Atwood's characterization of her work as "speculative" rather than science fiction, grounded in extrapolations from existing realities, might encourage readers to more easily connect the imaginative scenarios with their own moral and social worldviews.

I focused on selected moments where gendered power dynamics were visible, opening up a space for educational engagement with – and further development of – the themes presented. As it appears, the narrative imagination framework needs to be expanded, complemented, or rethought in light of emerging approaches to "reading otherwise" (i.e., posthumanist reading).

By way of conclusion, I would like to connect this contribution to the present moment. A situation of autumn 2025 is this: some of Atwood's books have been banned from public and school libraries. The latest is the ban of THT in the Canadian province of Alberta, purportedly due to the explicit sexual content (see Cecco, 2025). This mirrors the numerous bans in U. S. public schools (including OAC).

The question is: what should the role of literature be in democratic societies? Books are "not merely objects of consumption; they are laboratories of thought. By restricting what young people can read, societies risk stifling curiosity, empathy, and the ability to imagine alternatives to the present" (Speakeasy News, 2025). These banned titles address the very issues young people need to understand. They challenge, as the role of art should be, conventional wisdom and values.

Martha Nussbaum has this on the matter (2003): "We ought to protect the opportunity of the arts to explore new territory with broad latitude, and we should protect the right of university teachers to explore controversial works in the classroom, whether or not we ourselves have been convinced of their lasting merit."

As can be inferred from many of Atwood's works, oppression is most effective when it governs not only bodies but also narrative itself.

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