

## **ASPECTS OF THE CRITICAL UTOPIAN SOCIETIES IN MADDADDAM AND THE HUNGER GAMES: EDUCATION, LEISURE AND RELIGION**

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*Abstract: This article explores two essential aspects of the critical utopian society presented in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam, namely education and leisure, and emphasises their role in shaping people's lifestyle, behaviour and personal development.*

*Keywords: critical utopia, education, leisure, personality, society.*

Defined by Ursula K. Le Guin as “half prediction and half satire”, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy explores numerous problems of the twenty-first century society through irony, derision, and great wit, sounding a warning signal about their catastrophic outcome (qtd in Atwood *OW* 14). The topics approached by the author are complex and controversial, including: social-economic discrepancy, omnipotent corporations, terrorism, fanaticism, aggressive mass media, manipulation, the decay of the modern family and the vulnerability of the new generations, as well as failed scientific experiments, pandemics and environmental degradation. Atwood provides an insightful analysis of the individual (both male and female), its evolution from child to grownup and its relation with the world it lives in (in this case, a pre- and post-apocalyptic America). Education and leisure occupy an important place in Atwood's narrative exploration as they represent not only two basic factors, which according to Abraham Maslow's theory, influence “human motivation and self-actualization” (qtd Mangal 299) but also two essential aspects which shape and get shaped by society.

The volumes of the trilogy, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013), expose in great detail the faults of the contemporary education system and leisure. Throughout these books, Margaret Atwood underlines that people's choices regarding their training and future jobs or free time activities are almost always conditioned by their social

status, income, family background or the places where they live such as: the rich and sophisticated Compounds, the overcrowded and impoverished Pleeblands or the faraway remote villages that no one remembers. The author does not overshadow the existence of personal will, ambition and perseverance when it comes to social evolution; however, she underlines the triumph of general expectations over the individual. Consequently, the social-economic gap between rich and poor increases even more as their categories are educated, work and experience leisure in a different way. For instance, Compound schools (private schools for privileged kids) are known to offer better education and study conditions than the “dump bins from the public system” which are in a state of decay and overcrowded with Pleebrats (Atwood *OC* 24). Nevertheless, Pleebland schools (such as that of the God’s Gardeners) can be a better alternative to many other institutions or to no school at all.

In projecting Compound education, Atwood emphasises the fact that training and school curricula are modelled by the social expectations promoted in these rich and sophisticated cities. Students, for example, prepare for adulthood attending classes such as Life Skills and learning things like: “double-entry on-screen bookkeeping, banking by fingertip, using a microwave without nuking your egg, filling out housing applications for this or that Module and job applications for this or that Compound, family heredity research, negotiating your own marriage-and-divorce contracts, wise genetic match-mating, the proper use of condoms to avoid sexually transmitted bioforms” (Atwood *OC* 40). Due to their privileged status, these teenagers are expected to fulfil the requirements of the society they live in and are prepared accordingly.

Likewise, as modern society is more and more oriented towards technological and economic development to the detriment of the humanities and more and more young people hope to become scientists or economists instead of artists and writers. Margaret Atwood marks, therefore, the split between fields and individual by presenting two institutions of higher education such as: Watson-Crick Institute and Martha Graham Academy.

Students enrolled at Watson-Crick Institute (a sort of Harvard University) are “numbers persons”, autistic brainiacs with great scores in mathematics and biochemistry, who do not speak too much but dedicate their time to calculations and all sort of inventions depending on the department they belong to. Those studying in Botanical Transgenics (also known as Ornamental Division) create “a whole array of drought-and flood- resistant tropical blends, with flowers or leaves in lurid shades of chrome yellow and brilliant flame red and phosphorescent blue and

neon purple” (Atwood *OC* 197). NeoGeologists work on a project called “Rockulator” and their purpose is to produce fake rocks which might act as “natural lawn regulators” absorbing and releasing water into the atmosphere depending on temperature variations (Atwood *OC* 198). Rockulators are made “from a combomatrix of recycled plastic bottles and plant material from giant tree cacti and various lithops – the living-stone members of the Mesembryanthemaceae” and every month they get new improvements (Atwood *OC* 198). The latest model is called “Moses” and is meant to preserve fresh drinking water in times of crisis (Atwood *OC* 198). Not all projects function that well. Students in *Décor Botanicals* develop a “Smart Wallpaper” that contained a modified form of “Kirilian-energysensing algae” that changed function of the inhabitant’s mood (Atwood *OC* 199). Adjustments are still required regarding its resistance to humidity and mood recognition. Likewise, they also invent a line of bathroom towels that functions similarly but have an essential problem: when the algae get wet they “puff up like rectangular marshmallows” (Atwood *OC* 200). In the department of NeoAgriculturals or AgriCouture as they nickname it, things evolve much better. Students are in charge of the ChickieNobs, bioengineered chickens whose body is similar to that of a sea-anemone. Artificially fed and lacking eyes, brains or beaks, these monstrous-looking creatures are meant to grow fast and have only their breasts or legs fully developed. Finally, students in BioDefences work on a very aggressive dog breed called “wolvog” (Atwood *OC* 203). These friendly looking but extremely dangerous creatures are meant to act as moats and be more efficient than an alarm system. Atwood stresses the fact that the experiments made by Watson-Crick students have a great impact over all life segments– vegetation, animals and humans– invading, reinventing and destroying the natural balance. Although extremely dangerous, such activities are allowed to continue, as they bring a lot of investments and students can play God defying rational and moral boundaries.

At Martha Graham Academy, on the other hand, students are considered to be “word or image persons” and are able to choose, based on their talents, between Performing Arts and Contemporary arenas. Those who take the first option do some acting, singing and dancing. They put on plays such as *Macbeth* or other types of shows. The number of live performances is considerable reduced for financial and security problems but also because the public is no longer educated for such events. Thus, most artistic representations are limited to television broadcasts and watched by an ancient and nostalgic audience. Back in the 1980s the Academy also

introduced Filmmaking and Video Arts as part of its curriculum. These disciplines are not as interesting and important as they used to be because now, anyone who has a computer can create a movie, an animation or alter some old material. Doing Performing Arts is similar to studying Latin, or book-binding: they are nice to watch but completely useless. Contemporary arenas, on the other hand, are still much more profitable. Webgame Dynamics and Pictorial and Plastic Arts, or PicPlarts as students called it, help them get into advertising, and gain a better salary. Likewise, those studying Problematics or Spin and Grin, as its nickname went, could create slogans and brands for big corporations.

Obviously, in a world which is entirely science oriented, creativity and imagination are appreciated as long as they have a practical application. This way, general carelessness condemns performing arts to a cruel oblivion and implicitly to a certain death. Unlike, the graduates of Watson-Crick Institute, whose jobs are ensured by constantly growing corporations, those of Martha Graham Academy have to face a future dominated by uncertainty. Disregarded and abandoned by a materialistic society, these young artists are condemned to waste their minds and bodies working on reality shows and other type of entertaining programs, making pornographic movies or dancing at Scales and Tales. This is, however, a double-edged situation, as having people specialised only in a particular direction, while ignoring all the other aspects of education represents a real danger for the future of society. Individuals who focus only on a particular field, having no interest in others, or who simply live in a system which does not encourage them to find out more about the complexity of life and offer them a wider range of choices, remain limited and function solely as pieces of machinery, easy to control and manipulate.

Unlike Compound kids who are expected to get an education as if it were something commercial, or as Atwood's character, Ren says, "a thing that you got, like a dress" (Atwood *YF* 284), in the Pleeblands, kids face two possible alternatives: to be educated among the members of a cult such as the God's Gardeners or live in the streets and attend no school at all. Among the God's Gardeners education comes as a transformative experience. The members of this veg cult, called Adams and Eves, teach children how to survive in a dangerous and polluted environment, where mankind has lost its connection with nature and spirituality. Located in a former medical centre, called Wellness Clinic, the Gardener school does not offer proper conditions for teaching and learning such as those from the Compounds, but the appointed teachers try to do their best

and pass students all the important knowledge and skills. All lessons have to be memorized because in Gardeners' views written sources can become dangerous if they fall in the wrong hands and paper consumption is sinful. Thus, pupils have to learn by heart numerous chants which contain the history of the cult, its cosmogony with personalities from various fields presented as gods, every saint's day and every feast and more difficult things such as mathematics and science. As Gardeners strongly believe that there will be a "waterless flood" (Atwood *YF* 4) – a virulent pandemic that will sweep the world– kids have to learn certain disciplines that will help them survive in difficult conditions: Fabric Recycling, and Culinary Arts, which meant cooking, Sewing, Mental Arithmetic, Bees and Mycology, Holistic Healing with Plant Remedies, Wild and Garden Botanicals, Meditation, Emergency Medical and Human Reproductive System and Predator-Prey Relationships and Animal Camouflage. The last one is the most difficult class, as Zeb, the teacher tries to teach the children how to hunt and eat their prey. The lesson is summarized in a chant: "Seeing without being seen,/ Hearing without being heard./Smelling without being smelled. Eating without being eaten!/ Injuring without being injured" (Atwood *YF* 137). Things, however, are much more complicated in practice as these children are raised as vegetarians and animal lovers. It is a real challenge to make them kill and swallow "a chunk of bloody muscle and gristle" without throwing up. Gardeners' school is not one in the real sense of the word but the lessons taught here prove to be very useful and make a big difference between life and death. Moreover, the Gardeners' educative method embodies Atwood's alternative to rigid, institutionalised schooling.

Living in the streets and attending no school at all, does not mean that an individual cannot acquire a certain education. The impoverished Pleebrats learn from an early age how to manipulate people and beg for money and other goods, how to steal things, sell drugs or their bodies and eventually commit different crimes. They are definitely not the future workers a society would like to have but they can prove to be quite successful. Atwood reveals this idea by introducing Oryx, a little Asian girl sold by her mother and used by mobsters for beggary and pornographic movies. Although she is not sent to school, Oryx knows that "Everything has a price" (Atwood *OC* 137) and she always tries to get something in exchange for her sexual services starting from English lessons to money, luxury and even, an important job in the Paradise project.

From the institutional school system present in the Compounds to alternative schooling promoted by religious cults or the total absence of it in the Pleeblands, Margaret Atwood exposes the faults of nowadays Western society concerning education and the needs of individuals. The author, however, does not stop here and continues to explore and translate into literature a more “pleasant” form of education, namely leisure. The free time spent away from school, can also contribute to the individual’s self-actualization and self-fulfilment, as it usually includes a broad array of activities, such as sport, travelling, cultural discoveries or social games. All these aspects transform leisure into “a major social institution ... with serious sociological inquiry, particularly in Western societies”, as Frey and Dickens underline (264).

Margaret Atwood pays special attention to this concept and provides a detailed description to the way in which her characters, nowadays Americans, spend their free time and signals the danger of computer games, virtual reality and pornography. Likewise, she emphasises the idea that, just like education, leisure is conditioned by numerous factors such as: status, income, location, trends as well as intellectual abilities and convictions. For instance, the privileged Compounders (both children and adults) spend almost all their free time playing various computer games and watching violent news reports, reality shows and pornographic movies because they can afford them and more importantly the ‘general trend’ determines them to do it.

The first and the last novels of the trilogy, *Oryx and Crake* and *MaddAddam* describe the protagonists, Jimmy, Crake and Zeb, playing several games such as: virtual chess, Kwiktime Osama, Barbarian Stomp, Blood and Roses, Intestinal Parasites, or Extinctathon. The game of chess is not a traditional one. It is played online, on a virtual board creates while the opponents sit back to back avoiding eye contact and communication. Kwiktime Osama is similar to the game of chess but projects players in a Middle Eastern landscape where they have to shoot dead the Infidels. The third game, whose slogan is “See If You Can Change History!” makes players choose between great civilizations or the on one side and viciousness hordes on the other. It starts from historical dispositions– Rome versus the Visigoths, Ancient Egypt versus the Hyksos, Aztecs versus the Spaniards–but the victory belongs to those who played better. Blood and Roses is a trading game similar to Monopoly but “more cosmic” (Atwood *OC* 75). The field of battle is larger both in time and space, and players exchange large scale atrocities with human achievements or vice-versa after casting dice. Therefore, “one Mona Lisa equalled Bergen-Belsen, one Armenian genocide equalled the Ninth Symphony plus three Great Pyramids” – all of them

being called “Monuments to the soul’s magnificence” (Atwood *OC* 77). The problem with *Blood and Roses* is that bad things are easier to remember and that the Blood player usually wins though he eventually inherits a wasteland. *Intestinal Parasites* is a nasty game meant to give people nightmares though the biogeeks who play it find it “hilarious”. The parasites are hideous and have to be destroyed with toxic pills or an arsenal of nanobots or moteins before they infest players’ bodies with thousands of eggs or creep through their brains, or split themselves into regenerating segments (Atwood *MA* 196). Finally, *Extinctathon*, a “biofreak masterlore game” invented by Adam One, is similar to *Trivia*, yet it focuses only on extinct animals and plants. No more than informative, this game resembles “some tedious pedant [that] wouldn’t shut up (Atwood *OC* 78).

All these computer games seem to offer players the chance to check their strategic and logic thinking and expand their general culture. The knowledge acquired is, however, fragmentary and as long as players have the possibility to virtually recreate it, rewriting history or exchanging human treasures with mass destructions, they lose the ability to appreciate its value. Moreover, these games can easily become addictive and estrange people (especially teenagers) from outdoor activities, make them autistic, frustrated and unable to interact with other persons. Trapped by the plots of these games, players spend days and nights following requirements, winning points and climbing level after level. Slowly, they lose their sense of reality as well as the ability to empathize, living with the impression that they can play God and control the course of nature, trigger genocides, destroy cities and change the world itself by a simple touch. In the end, all that these players are left with, is just as Atwood shows, is a sense of emptiness.

Wealthier people can afford to take virtual reality to another level due to *Feel-iT* installations, which offer them “stimulating flesh-on-flesh sensations”! (Atwood *MA* 115). These are special devices that usually provide virtual sexual experiences, but also re-enactments of crimes. Zeb’s father, the Rev, prefers to virtually behead famous women such as Mary, Queen of Scots, Anne Boleyn, Katherine Howard, Lady Jane Grey with an axe. The helmet and the gloves made the whole sensation feels right in his hands and for an extra charge he can also see them naked on their knees. This type of devices and experiences are indeed sick and depraved, yet they may also have a positive side as they stop psychopaths from committing more crimes.

Apart from playing computer games or being stimulated by Feel-iT installations, grownups and kids relax smoking a joint and surfing the internet for various shows. They start, for instance, by watching open heart surgery in live time, The Noodie News, a news program where reporters are naked, or the dirtysockpuppets.com, a puppet show about political leaders, similar to “ITV’s Spitting Image programme” (Sobriquet Magazine 2). Culture is reduced to sites such as “At Home With Anna K. Anna K.” or “Queek Geek Show”. The first one presents “an artist with big boobs” doing all sort of activities, from tweezing her eyebrows, to reading *Macbeth* while sitting on her toilet. The second one features contestants eating of live animals and birds timed by stopwatches. In depicting these shows, Atwood used several real life models and in the article titled “Margaret Atwood, Transhumanism, and the Singularity”, Sobriquet Magazine associates the exhibitionistic website “At Home With Anna K” with “Ana Voog’s AnaCam” or “the lifecasting movement pioneered by Jennifer Ringley and her now-defunct JenniCam website” and compares “Queek Geek” to “Fear Factor” an American stunt/dare reality game show broadcasted between 2001 and 2006 (2).

For more action Compounders can switch to assisted-suicide sites such as nitee-nite.com. A long line of people are ready to pay a lot of money in order to broadcast the last moments of their lives. There would be family photos and interviews, a documentary about the protagonist’s life and a party all of this followed by a “sad-eyed doctor” declaring him/her dead (Atwood *OC* 81). This show, says Sobriquet Magazine, evokes the case of Craig Ewert, who “allowed his death in Switzerland to be documented by Sky TV for their controversial Right to Die documentary” (2). Other sites go even further: Felicia’s Frog Squash shows various animals ‘being torn apart by hand’ (Atwood *OC* 18), hedsoff.com, a site which plays live coverage of executions from Asia and alibooboo.com, reveals thieves having their hands cut off and adulterers being stoned to death in fundamentalist countries from the Middle East. American sites, however, are more entertaining because man slaughters come with sports-event commentary such as “Here he comes now! Yes! It’s Joe ‘The Ratchet Set’ Ricardo, voted tops by you viewers!” (Atwood *OC* 80). Among them shortcircuit.com, brainfrizz.com, and deathrowlive.com are the best as they broadcast electrocutions and lethal injections and all the “weepy affairs” surrounding them (Atwood *OC* 81). The death row inmates were usually men. Executing women is a solemn procedure as people would light candles, show photos of children and read poems. Occasionally, the inmates would swear, send a message or simply fight the

guards trying to escape. This makes the program more exiting and perhaps such moments are required and paid by sponsors in order to satisfy public's desire be shocked by something unexpected.

Among the reality shows featuring executions, Painball is however, the most intriguing and popular. Criminals of any kind have to choose between being spraygunned to death or spend time in the Painball Arena, an enclosed forest filled up with cameras. Inside, contestants are assigned to one of two teams: the Red, the Gold, receive food for two weeks and a Painball gun which shoots regular paint, but if it hit in the eyes or touch their skin it transforms them into easy targets. As the game has no rules, teams can hang their rivals, mutilate their bodies and even eat their kidneys. Those who resist there are reduced to an animal level becoming a danger for everyone else but winners are set free and treated as real stars.

Besides executions, viewers can also watch some porn shows such as "Tart of the Day" and "Superswallowers", which feature "elaborate confectionery in the usual orifices", or Russian site which employed ex-acrobats, ballerinas, and contortionists to perform "highwire act[s] with the six flaming torches was pretty good" (Atwood *OC* 87). HottTotts is, however, the most famous. Promoted as "a global sex-trotting site" the show presents various sex tourists abusing little Asian girls as a "Gulliver-in-Lilliput" act. Girls are made to wear garlands of flowers and pink ribbons, to cry or laugh on command while the viewers perceive them more "as digital clones" than real children (Atwood *OC* 88).

Margaret Atwood does not address this topic by chance. She draws attention to the fact "the seemingly far-fetched idea of broadcasting live executions [and pornography] has already been discussed, with a high percentage of the U.S. population receptive to the concept" (*Sobriquet Magazine* 1). She cautions readers regarding the fact that people's power of perception has been deeply desensitized. They have lost the ability of making the difference between life and simulation, good and bad. Those life broadcasted crimes and rapes seem no different than those from the computer games and for a teenager, such as Jimmy, the protagonist of *Oryx and Crake*, they can be hilarious and horrifying in the same time. Emotionally blind, unable to react to tragedies or romance, the boy continues to watch those shows as if: "[his] body had its own cultural forms... its own art. Executions were its tragedies, pornography was its romance" (Atwood *OC* 83).

It is also important to stress that most characters who spend their free time playing computer games and watching online executions and pornography have a better socio-economic condition and therefore, the resources to do it. Meanwhile, most of the victims who get killed or sexually abused come from the poor layers of society. Of course, Compounders may also participate in these shows being tortured and executed, yet they are the exceptions which confirm the rule. Spent on computer games, reality shows and pornography, leisure does not have a positive role in the lives of people and does not help improve their condition and creativity. Basically, it destroys their bodies, minds and souls and unless they do not take.

To summarize, the role of education and leisure is to help an individual as well as the society he/she lives in evolve. However, since both concepts are socially conditioned by definition, they are also shaken by the problems, society has to face. A talented writer and analyst, Margaret Atwood translates contemporary fears concerning education and leisure into literature, revealing throughout her *MaddAddam* trilogy, the negative impact of the increased social-economic gap and of the local/ global trends.

In conclusion, the reader is invited to meditate upon the possible outcome of a profit oriented education deprived of humanistic disciplines and a leisure time focused on the desensitization and the isolation of the individual. As results appear to be catastrophic and Margaret Atwood cautions her readership about them, and we can extrapolate and say that the change rests in our hands.

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