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The Complexity of Motherhood in Dystopian Novels

A comparative study of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*

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Lois Lowry's *The Giver*

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Abstract

This study explores how motherhood is depicted in Margaret Atwood's and Louis Lowry's dystopian novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Giver*. It examines the negative social and psychological consequences of forced surrogacy in the novels' state-constructed nuclear families, looking closely at a lack of maternal love and care. Using feminist and psychoanalytic criticism, this essay examines the link between the broken connection of mother and child and the protagonists' search for maternal love in other relationships. It contrasts the protagonists' rebellion to the social backlash effect and shows how motherhood emerges as a form of resistance against the social engineering of the dystopian societies.

Keywords: motherhood, maternal love, Mirror Stage, objet petit a, backlash effect

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1 Introduction

Dystopian novels depict possible, catastrophic, near futures. One of their main tasks is to illuminate problems that already exist in society, by constructing their worst potential outcomes (Myers 1). Therefore, dystopias often portray common issues such as patriarchal oppression, environmental destruction, religious oppression, and declining or rising birthrates. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* illustrate dystopian societies which have found the same solution to their issues of declining versus rising populations. The states have taken control over people's individual choices, including family and procreation.

With a 'return to traditional values', *The Handmaid's Tale's* Gilead and *The Giver's* unnamed community are designed to comprise nuclear families entirely. However, what first appears to be a simple return to the traditional family of three or four, turns out to be the opposite. Most children are conceived by women who have been forced to become surrogates, called Handmaids and Birthmothers. Their only tasks are to carry babies for couples chosen by the states. These women are forced into biological motherhood to children they are not allowed to mother, at the same time as the couples chosen by the states are expected to parent children who may or may not be biologically their own. In other words, these women are forced into different types of involuntary motherhood.

In this way, motherhood becomes an entirely social role, separated from bodily autonomy, volition, or emotion. As taking away a child from its biological mother at birth disrupts the natural connection between mother and child, this makes motherhood more complicated than it normally is. When analyzing the protagonists social and psychological behaviors, it becomes clear to us that the states have failed to include the element of maternal love as an essential part of the families. This highlights the issue of the broken bond between mother and child, which does occur in society today. Ultimately both of the novels take the view that the most important aspect of motherhood is maternal love and in the novels maternal love becomes a form of resistance against the state constructed mother archetypes.

1.1 *Frame of Study*

Relying primarily on Myers' dissertation *We come apart: mother-child relationships in Margaret Atwood's dystopias*, this essay will analyze the social and psychological aspects of motherhood in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Giver*. It will examine how the novels' societies

are negatively affected by social aspects of motherhood being more important than emotional and highlight one of the novels cautionary messages: the importance of bonding and care in mother-child relationships. The analysis has been divided into three sections. Following a brief introduction to the works and theory, the first part of the analysis will explore traditional, voluntarily motherhood alongside with untraditional, involuntary motherhood and examine how these affect the plot of the novels. The second part of the analysis will examine Offred's and Jonas' social behaviors with the psychological terms of the Mirror Stage and objet petite a. The third part of the analysis will examine the protagonists damaged relationships with their parents in relation to the backlash effect. Lastly, the conclusion will show that the societies have failed to include the element of maternal love in the constructed families and since societies are built up by families the societies fail where they were meant to succeed.

2 Background of the Novels

2.1 *The Handmaid's Tale*

The novel was written by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood. It was published in 1985 and has been made into both a movie and an opera. In 2017 it was released as a Hulu TV-series, which became an immediate success and re-ignited interest in the book. *The Handmaid's Tale* has caused heated discussion worldwide, and the TV-series imagery of the Handmaids in red have been used in both debates and discussions about reproductive rights (Beaumont and Holpuch).

The novel is set in the Republic of Gilead, which used to be the United States of America. The American president has been shot and the government overthrown, and a group of right-wing extremes have created a new society. Gilead is a male-dominated hierarchy, based on a 'return to traditional values.' Women have lost all their rights, have become subservient to men and are expected to stay at home and do domestic chores, while taking care of the children. The state controls reproduction and women no longer have authority over their own bodies. The novel is written from the Handmaid Offred's perspective and through her, the reader learns about her past as a daughter, wife, mother, and her present in Gilead. Since Offred is one of the few women who still has viable reproductive organs, she has been forced to become a Handmaid.

The Handmaids only serve the purpose of carrying babies for couples of the elite who cannot have children on their own, and each of them is placed in the home of a Commander and Wife. Offred currently lives with Commander Fred and his wife Serena, and her name

stands for Of Fred, as in property of Fred. Once a month Offred is forced to have intercourse with the Commander, while being held down by Serena, laying with her head between her legs. If Offred gives birth to a child, the child will be taken away from her at birth and given to Serena, making her and Fred the legal parents. In that way, it is only Serena who receives the social recognition as the child's mother.

The novel has been called "a feminist 1984" (Johnson) and has received widespread but not universal acclaim. Its initial reviews were overall positive, but it was famously criticized by Mary McCarty ("Book Review"). In 1986 *The Handmaid's Tale* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and it won the Governor General's Literary Award for English-language Fiction the following year. Since its release, the book has been widely criticized and banned in both schools and libraries. It has been "celebrated and denigrated and feared and loved" and has made the list of the top banned books in the United States from its release until today (Charles).

Since its publication the novel has been thoroughly studied, the most popular approach being women's studies. The topic of motherhood chosen for this essay has proven to be less examined, even if the research has generated a handful of interesting studies. Some notable works on motherhood that have contributed to this essay are Kristi Jayne Myers' dissertation *We Come Apart: Mother-Child Relationships in Margaret Atwood's Dystopias*, Ewelina Feldman Kołodziejuk's essay "Mothers and Daughters, Sisters: The Intergenerational Transmission of Womanhood in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*" and Barbara Miceli's essay "Religion, Gender Inequality, and Surrogate Motherhood in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*".

In her thesis, Myers examines how the broken relationship between mother and child "shape the world and to what extent external forces impact the ways mothers and children bond with one another" (2). By examining forgiveness and cooperation as playing integral roles in the survival of Offred, Myers describes how Offred's disappointment over her mother's mothering heals as she matures and brings her to the realization that her mother did the best she could (9). Myers further examines how forced surrogacy influences the otherwise natural connection between mother and child. She also discusses how the Handmaids' lack of friendships and support from other women affect their mental wellbeing.

Feldman Kołodziejuk essay provides a feminist critique of *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which she examines the broken mother-daughter relationships. Feldman Kołodziejuk states that *The Handmaid's Tale* is "a response to a crisis in the feminist movement" (69) and uses

the backlash concept to analyze how the feminist activism of Offred's mother damaged their relationship.

Miceli examines surrogate motherhood, women roles and family consultations. She uses Teman's theory of three different mother roles involved in surrogacy, being generic, gestation, and social (103). Miceli claims that the only mother mattering in Gilead to the social mother and describes how the other two mother types are rejected at birth. Additionally, she points out that the Handmaids have not chosen, but have been forced to become surrogates and examines how this affects the relationships between the Handmaids and the Wives.

There are other articles which have inspired this essay but not directly influenced the analysis. Two of these are Sarah R. Morrison's essay "Mothering Desire: The Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *The Madness of a Seduced Woman*" and Katherine Snyder's essay "Screen Memories: Maternal After-Images in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Novels".

Morrison examines the importance of romance in female novels. She concludes that it is not always the heterosexual love between a man and woman that is the most important love in a novel, but the love between women. She claims that the bond between mothers and daughters is the most important love in *The Handmaid's Tale* and demonstrates how Offred's maturation helps this love to heal. Since love is not a part of this analysis, this essay has not directly influenced the analysis and has not been included.

Snyder focuses on Offred's memories of her relationships with her mother and daughter. She argues that Offred's memories work as a link between the past and present, serving as "narratives as windows onto their post-apocalyptic protagonists' pasts but, as such, they also represent points of departure for re-envisioning our collective future" (187). Since this essay focuses more on motherhood than memories, it has not been included in the analysis.

2.2 *The Giver*

The novel was written by the American author Lois Lowry. It was published in 1993 and released as a movie in 2014. Even if the movie did not receive critical acclaim, it made the novel receive renewed attention in the media.

The Giver is written for young adults and narrated by 12-year-old Jonas. Jonas lives in an unnamed community which first appears to be utopian. In the community there is no pain, suffering or hunger and it first seems like all the problems of the world before are

solved. However, it soon becomes clear that no memories, feelings, or free choice exist either. Even colors have ceased to exist as a result of the community's state of 'sameness'. Even if the people in the community are completely unaware of it, everything is controlled by the state. People are forced to live in traditional nuclear families and all children are produced by Birthmothers who have been artificially inseminated. Everyone in the community has a certain role and is assigned a specific work task at the age of twelve.

When it becomes time for Jonas to be assigned a job, he is chosen to be the new *Receiver of Memory*. He immediately starts his training with the Giver, who stores all the memories of the world before; it is these memories which Jonas has been chosen to take over. As the Giver starts to forward the memories to Jonas, Jonas finds out about a past no one else in the community knows of. As he learns sunshine and snow, joy and sadness, and love and hate, he realizes how much the community is lacking. Eventually he decides to escape from the community with the baby Gabriel, who is staying with his family for the moment.

Even if the novel's ending has been frequently criticized, the novel initially received overall positive reviews. It was praised by *New York Times*' Karen Bay, who called it "powerful and proactive" ("Children's Books"), has made several best-selling lists and won the Newbery Medal prize in 1994. The novel has however been widely criticized for its "offensive language" and been stated to be "sexually explicit," too "dark" and too "violent" ("Why 'The Giver' is One of The Most Banned Books in America"). According to Business Insider, it is "one of the most banned books in American Schools" and in 1993, it was the number eleven on the list of most requests for removal ("Why 'The Giver' is One of The Most Banned Books in America").

The Giver has been studied extensively, one of the most popular areas of study being how the novel affects its young adult readers. However, there are a few studies that deal with the concept of motherhood. One essay that has contributed much to the creation of this essay is Don Latham's "Childhood Under Siege: Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* and *The Giver*" in which Latham examines the concept of childhood in *The Giver*. Latham states that childhood is viewed differently in every period and culture and believes that Lowry tries to show this in her novel. He concludes that both children and adults are treated like children by the state and reflects on how the state of sameness and the community's lack of mirrors can be connected to the Mirror Stage concept. Latham concludes that the community's lack of mirrors is a symbol of the lack of the Mirror Stage and claims that the people in the community have not yet understood themselves as individual beings and still experience the world as one unit.

Another essay that has inspired but not directly influenced this essay is Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak's and Mateusz Marecki's "Understanding Motherhood as Maturation: Maternity Scripts in Lois Lowry's *Son*". In this essay different aspects of motherhood are explored. The authors suggest that the novel "presents the reader with at least three conceptual models of motherhood", begin mothers "as human egg incubators," "as caring and nurturing" and "as abusive and neglectful" (1). They further demonstrate "how Lowry creates her vision of maternity through cognitive scripting and how her young audience understands and makes sense of motherhood by resorting to the underlying conceptual metaphor motherhood is maturation" (1).

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 *Dystopian Novels*

Before getting deeper into the analysis, it is important to understand what a dystopian novel is and what it does. As stated by Myers, dystopian novels are cautionary tales, written to warn and inspire at the same time (10), aiming to show that the perfect society does not exist. They are usually set in the near future and "reflect the concerns and fears of the writer's contemporaneous culture" ("Dystopia Encyclopedia.Com").

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, dystopia means "an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible; opposed to utopia" ("Dystopia"). By depicting a horrifying, alternative reality, a dystopian novel aims to shock the reader "into accepting humanity's flaws as ineradicable and thereby working toward a better society rather than an ideal one" ("Dystopia Encyclopedia.om"). As concluded by Encyclopedia:

Dystopia angrily challenges utopia's fundamental assumption of human perfectibility, arguing that humanity's inherent flaws negate the possibility of constructing perfect societies, except for those that are perfectly hellish. Dystopias are solely fictional, presenting grim, oppressive societies—with the moralistic goal of preventing the horrors they illustrate. ("Dystopia Encyclopedia.Com")

In other words, utopias depict societies of peace and equality while dystopias depict the opposite, and it is common that dystopian novels explore how easily this line can be blurred.

3.2 *Definitions of Motherhood*

This essay's exploration of motherhood is grounded in feminist and psychoanalytic criticism and argues that motherhood is redefined in dystopian societies. According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, motherhood means: "the state, condition, or fact of being a mother" ("Motherhood"). Mother itself means "the female parent of a child or animal; a person who is acting as a mother to a child" ("Mother"). As this definition of mother implies, it is not always who birthed a child, but who acts like a mother, that receives the social recognition of motherhood. It also implies that the mother is a female who chooses to step into the role of motherhood.

In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, feminist sociologist and professor Nancy Chodorow defines motherhood as "the person who socializes and nurtures" the children (11). This definition may help one to understand the concept of motherhood in dystopian novels. She also states that women are expected to "take primary responsibility for infant care, spend more time with infants and children than do men, and sustain primary emotional ties with infants" (3).

In *Maternal Thinking*, feminist philosopher and author Sara Ruddick defines mothering as "to take upon oneself the responsibility of childcare, making its work a regular and substantial part of one's working life" and asserts that anyone who takes on "maternal work" (17) is mothering. Along these lines, Ruddick validates others than the children's biological mothers, which opens the door for both adoptive parents and men in maternal roles. Ruddick concludes that a mother's task is to protect and nurture the child and recognizes the "considerable burden" (20) that rest on mothers:

Women as well as men may refuse to be aware of or respond to the demands of children; some women abuse or abandon creatures who are, in all cultures, dependent and vulnerable. All mothers sometimes turn away, refuse to listen, stop caring. Both maternal work and the thinking that is provoked by it are decisively shaped by the possibility that any mother may refuse to see creatures as children or to respond to them as complicated, fragile, and needy. (22)

As concluded here, motherhood is complicated. The states of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Giver* complicates it even more by challenging the traditional understanding of motherhood to

be limited to the legal mothers only. However, the novels themselves present an expanded area of motherhood, as explained above.

3.3 *Lacanian Concepts*

In this essay Jonas and Offred's social behaviors' will be psychoanalytically analyzed. Using Lacan's concepts of the Mirror Stage and *objet petit a*, the protagonists' search for maternal love will be examined. Lacan built on Freud's theory of infants being helpless and reliant on their mothers' nurture and care ("Jacques Lacan (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)"). Lacan claimed that infants in their first months of life have no way of determining the difference between themselves, their parents and their environment. According to Lacan this begins to shift when infants start to recognize themselves as a "whole" in reflective surfaces, realizing themselves to be a different person than their mother ("Jacques Lacan (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)"). Lacan called this the Mirror Stage.

According to him infants enter the Mirror Stage around six to eight months old. In the Mirror Stage the baby starts to develop an understanding of itself as its own being, through reflections of mirrors and reactions of the mother. In union with its mother, the child starts to experience itself as a being. Lacan argued that infants are "encouraged to identify with the mirror image as "me" by verbal and gestural prompts issuing from the bigger other(s) holding him/her up in front of the reflective surface" ("Jacques Lacan (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)"). Tyson describes the Mirror Stage:

And it is a world of fullness, completeness, and delight because with the child's sense of itself as a whole comes the illusion of control over its environment, of which it still perceives itself an inseparable part, and over its mother, with whom it feels it is in a union of mutual satisfaction: my mother is all I need, and I am all my mother needs. (Tyson 27)

In the Mirror Stage the baby enters a preverbal stage of life which Lacan called the *Imaginary Order*. In this preverbal stage of life, the baby experiences a world of pictures instead of words (Felluga). This stage continues until the moment the child starts to learn language, which Lacan calls the *Symbolic Order*. At this point, the child starts to experience the world on its own, separate from its mother (Tyson 27). Even though infants are still dependent on their mothers long after the Mirror Stage, this stage is crucial for the baby's life.

Closely connected to the Mirror Stage is what Lacan called the *objet petit a*, which means the ‘lost object of desire’ (Tyson 29). *Objet petit a* is the feeling of wanting to be complete again, of being in union with one’s mother as when in the Mirror Stage. According to Lacan, people spend their whole lives “chasing in vain after an unattainable state of harmony and mastery first falsely promised by the mirror” (“Jacques Lacan (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy”). He concluded that humans seek substitutes for this in different areas of their lives, as in searching for the perfect partner, trying to become successful, or attempting to be more beautiful. In short, it is what the unconscious tells a person that he or she needs in order to be happy. However, as what the unconscious actually wants is to be in the Mirror Stage with its mother again, the feeling of complete fulfillment is impossible to reach. As concluded by Tyson, “it is important to note that *object petit* also refers to anything that puts me in touch with my repressed desire for my lost object” (29).

3.4 *The Backlash Effect*

Offred’s and Jonas’s unconscious searches for maternal love can be connected to the concept of the backlash effect. It means: “a strong negative reaction by a large number of people, for example, to something that has recently changed in society” (“Backlash”). The concept of backlash was commonly used in the 1980s when there was a significant backlash against the feminist movement. As feminist sociologist Alice Rossi argued, it was perceived that “feminism had gone too far in its neglect of inborn biological differences between sexes” (qtd. in Kołodziejuk 69) and many people thought that these values were too radical and “anti-male and anti-family” (Feldman Kołodziejuk 71). Out of this came post-feminism.

As stated by Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake in *Third Wave Agenda*, “‘postfeminist’ characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave” (1). Many postfeminists felt rejected by their mothers, as many of them had been preoccupied with their activism and therefore spent little time with their children. Feminist philosopher and writer Elisabeth Badinter contrasts this in her book *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*:

In pursuit of your independence, you sacrificed me as well. You didn’t give me enough love, enough care, enough time. You were always in a hurry and often tired; you thought the quality of the time you spent with me was more important than the

quantity. The truth is, I was not your top priority and you were not a good mother. I won't do the same with my children. (108)

As this description implies, many postfeminist daughters felt rejected by their second wave feminist mothers. This definition can be used to describe the damaged mother-child relationships of *The Handmaid's Tale* and appears to describe Offred's relationship to her mother.

Because of their difficulty in identifying with their mothers' feminist movement, some women started to form a new ideal of womanhood (Feldman Kołodziejuk 70). Instead of choosing to continue their mothers' fight towards gender equality, women of the postfeminist era chose to focus on themselves, their families, and their careers. As Shirley Neuman stated, Offred is a product of the 1970s feminism, who finds herself in a situation partly caused by the backlash against second wave-feminism (858). It is important to acknowledge the presence of Moira as a feminist voice in the novel. However, since she is not a mother, she will not be closer examined in this essay.

4 Analysis

4.1 *The Complexity of Dystopian Motherhood*

These dystopias challenge the understanding of motherhood as a nurturing and loving relationship with a child with whom the mother might or might not have a biological connection, by creating a motherhood based only on the legal and social bonds of mother and child. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Giver* present nurturing love and care as essential elements of motherhood. With a 'return to traditional values', Gilead and *The Giver's* unnamed community are designed to comprise nuclear families entirely. But what first appears to be simple a return to the traditional family model, turns out to be the opposite, as most children are conceived by surrogates and taken away from their biological mothers at birth, and given to a couple chosen to be its legal parents. This interrupts the natural connection between mother and child, as it forces both biological mothers and legal mother into parental roles, which makes parenthood more complicated than it normally is. In this way, motherhood becomes an entirely social role, separated from bodily autonomy, volition, or emotion.

Aunt Lydia initially tells the Handmaids that they will live like a family in harmony with the Wives:

For the generations that come after, Aunt Lydia said, it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family, you will be like daughters to them, and when the population level is up to scratch again we'll no longer have to transfer you from one house to another because there will be enough to go round. There can be bonds of real affection, she said, blinking at us ingratiatingly, under such conditions. Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk their path of life together, each performing her appointed task. (Atwood 171)

In this way, Aunt Lydia tries to create hope for meaningful relationships in the Handmaids. However, this is not the case in reality and the Handmaids are sent away soon after birth. It appears that Offred was hoping for some sort of connection with Serena. But at their first interaction Serena tells Offred that she wants "to see as little of [her] as possible" and makes clear that she only sees their relationship "like a business transaction" (Atwood 25). Offred appears disappointed by this and reflects over the fact that she wished to "turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect [her]" (Atwood 26).

In Gilead it is only the social mothers who are valued, and the Handmaids do not receive any recognitions as mothers. This is clearly depicted at the Handmaid Offred's labor, when the Wife sits behind her in the Birth Stool, pretending to give birth through her. Afterwards the baby is "placed ceremoniously" in the Wife's arms (Atwood 136), making her the baby's legal mother. Offred describes the attention the Wife receives from the other Wives:

The Wives from downstairs are crowding in now, pushing among us, pushing us aside. ... Envy radiates from them, I can smell it, faint wisps of acid, mingled with their perfume. The Commander's Wife looks down at the baby as if it's a bouquet of flowers: something she's won, a tribute. (Atwood 136)

As described here, the Wife receives a certain social status as a new mother, which the other Wives appear jealous of. It is also interesting to note that the new mother looks down at the baby like it is "something she's won, a tribute", instead of looking down at the child with

love, which is something new mothers normally do. It is however important to remember that the Wives do not choose to become mothers but are expected to do so by the state. In other words, motherhood in Gilead is atomized and coercively controlled, and it is only the Wives who are socially recognized as mothers.

Through Offred's tale, the reader also comes to know her as a daughter, a wife, and a mother, which creates an interesting juxtaposition for the plot of the story. Offred and her husband make an active decision to have children. They dream of a big house with a large garden for their children to play in and await their daughter with excitement:

Lying in bed, with Luke, his hand on my rounded belly. The three of us, in bed, she kicking, turning over within me. Thunderstorm outside the window, that's why she's awake, they can hear, they sleep, they can be startled, even there in the soothing of the heart, like waves on the shore around them. (Atwood 131).

As shown here, Offred and her husband awaited their daughter together. They also appear to have some knowledge of what the baby can hear in the belly, which can be understood as a sign of involvement and interest in the pregnancy.

Offred appears to have had a complicated relationship to her mother. However, Offred's mother chose to become a mother. She describes this to Offred:

You were a wanted child, all right ... But when I was six months' pregnant, a lot of them started sending me these articles about how the birth defect rate went zooming up after thirty-five ... and a lot of stuff of being a single parent. Fuck that shit, I told them, I've started this and I'm going to finish it. (130)

As this quotation shows, Offred's mother made an active decision to become a mother, despite the opinions of her friends. She wanted to become a mother and tries to show Offred this.

When Serena shows Offred a photograph of her daughter, Offred realizes that she has "been obliterated for her" (Atwood 240) and understands that she is not a mother in the traditional sense anymore. As Offred used to identify herself as a mother, she loses a part of herself when she realizes this. If Offred becomes pregnant in Gilead she will not be identified

as a mother either. As concluded by Myers, Offred's "identity relies upon her potential to become a mother, but not in the traditionally defined sense" (13).

When Offred reminisces about her daughter, her love for her daughter is evident. This contrasts the element of maternal love which appears to be missing in many of the state-constructed families of Gilead. Some of the Wives appear to love the children they have been chosen to raise, while others do not, but there is no normativity to maternal love. The Wives are required to raise the children they have been given but love and care is not a mandatory element of it. It is recognized that "mothers reproduce the mothering they received" (Myers 19), which raises the question if one can teach love if one does not know what it is. This in turn raises the question if a society can work without the element of maternal love.

There are many similarities between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Giver*. *The Giver's* unnamed community comprises the same type of nuclear families, and the children are exclusively conceived by surrogates, called Birthmothers. The Birthmothers live under relatively good conditions in comparison to the Handmaids. Still, even if they are not forced into having intercourse with different men and are artificially inseminated, they are involuntarily impregnated. It is important to note that all dystopias depict different degrees of oppression, and the oppression in *The Giver* is less overt than the one in *The Handmaid's Tale*. One reason for this is that most of the citizens do not know of the world before their own, and therefore they are completely unaware of the oppression they live under. Because of this the Birthmothers do not suspect anything wrong with their way of birthing children who they are not allowed to mother themselves.

It is implied that being a Birthmother is not as prestigious as the other occupations in the community. This is clearly depicted when Jonas' sister Lily states that she would like to become a Birthmother, and their mother replies:

"Three years", Mother told her firmly. "Three births, and that's all. After that they are Laborers for the rest of their adult lives, until the day that they enter the House of the old. Is that what you want, Lily? Three lazy years, and then hard physical labor until you are old". (Lowry 22)

With this statement Jonas' mother shows her views on both Birthmothers and physical labor. It is clear that she does not think it is a job to strive to have. In the community it is only the social mother who is valued, and as Jonas' father concludes, the "Birthmothers never even get

to see new-children” (22). It is interesting to note that he does not call the children “their children” but “new-children”, which shows that he does not consider the children to be the Birthmothers’ children. In other words, the Birthmothers are only used as vessels and do not receive any social recognition as mothers.

There are many differences between the *The Giver*’s community and Gilead. To start with, Gilead has a strict patriarchal structure, in comparison to the state of ‘Sameness’ in *The Giver*. Gilead’s hardworking Commanders and stay-at-home Wives are contrasted to the social roles of *The Giver*’s community. Jonas’ mother has an important position at the ‘Department of Justice’, and his father is a Nurturer who not only takes care of the new children in the community but the children of the family. This does not only challenge traditional gender roles, but the traditional idea of mothers as primary caretakers and extends motherhood to include men.

Even if Jonas’ father has taken on a maternal role, his mothering is also lacking the element of maternal love and care. This can be seen as a natural consequence of the lack of existing emotions in the community, as well as a consequence of the use of Birthmothers. Jonas’ father’s lack of emotions is clearly shown when Jonas asks his parents if they love him:

“Do you love me?” There was an awkward silence for a moment. Then Father gave a little chuckle. “Jonas. You, of all people. Precision of language, *please!*” “What do you mean?” Jonas asked. Amusement was not at all what he had anticipated. “Your father means that you use a very generalized word, so meaningless that it’s become almost obsolete,” his mother explained carefully. (Lowry 127)

This quotation shows the views of both Jonas’ father and mother. It is clear that love for them is everything but a natural feeling.

Jonas’ father’s lack of emotions is also demonstrated in his work. Together with the Giver, Jonas watches a video clip of his father, and learns that his father helps the state to kill off babies who do not live up to the community’s standard (Lowry 150):

To his surprise, his father began very carefully to direct the needle into the top of the new-child’s forehead, puncturing the place where the fragile skin pulsed. The newborn squirmed, and wailed faintly ... Still in the special voice, his father was saying, “I

know, I know. It hurt, little guy. But I have to use that vein, and the veins in your arms are still too teeny-weeny... He pushed the plunger very slowly, injecting the liquid into the scalp vein until the syringe was empty.” (Lowry 150)

Jonas father’s indifference to killing babies is further demonstrated when he tells Jonas about Gabriel’s planned killing. While playing with Gabriel, he clarifies that even he “voted for Gabriel’s release” and sings “it’s bye-bye to you Gabe, in the morning” (Lowry 165).

The most traditional looking mother-child relationship in the novel can be found in the relationship of Jonas and Gabriel. Unlike the rest of community, Jonas can feel his feelings and knows how to love. The love he feels for Gabriel appears to grow to be almost maternal, even though he is still a young boy. This blurring between childhood and adulthood is noted by Latham, who stated:

It would seem that in this kind of society, there is no blurring of the line between childhood and adulthood, with every stage in the development process so clearly defined. However, this is not really the case, for in this society everyone is expected to behave as an adult and, at the same time, everyone is treated like a child. (10)

In other words, there line between childhood and adulthood appears to be blurred.

In both novels, the state’s leaders attempt to control their people, by creating societies built up by nuclear families entirely. Using Handmaids and Birthmothers, they force women to carry and give up their children, which is affecting the natural connection between mother and bond. Couples are chosen to become parents by the state and forced into parenting children who may not be biologically their own. However, since the states have forgotten to include the element of maternal love in their constructed families, they appear to fail where they are meant to succeed. In Gilead it appears that some of the Wives love their children, while others do not. In the community of *The Giver*, the parents simply do not know how to love, since feelings do not exist. In other words, there is no normativity to maternal love. The parents are required to raise the children they are given but love and care is not a mandatory element of the children’s upbringing. In both novels, motherhood is atomized and coercively controlled, and it is only the social mothers who are valued. This creates a complex picture of motherhood, which affect the protagonists’ psychological behaviors.

4.2 *Aspects of Lacanian Psychology in the Novels*

Offred's and Jonas's social behaviors and searches for maternal love can be explained with Lacan's concepts of the Mirror Stage and the lost object of desire. Through Offred's tale, the reader learns that her relationship with her mother was complicated. When Offred was a child, her mother was often away, and even when she had promised to spend time with her, she appears to have been distant. She remembers being in the park with her mother:

That's it: she said we were going to feed the ducks. But there were some women burning books, that's what she was really here for. To see her friends; she'd lied to me, Saturdays were supposed to be my day". (Atwood 48)

As this quotation shows, Offred sometimes felt like she did not receive the attention she wanted from her mother. If examining this on a deeper level, it is possible to connect this to when Offred was in the Mirror Stage with her mother. She is blaming her mother for being distant from her when she in fact is blaming her for not being one with her, as she experienced the world when she was in the Mirror Stage with her mother. As mentioned in the theory section of this essay, Lacan claimed that the child's separation from its mother is the most significant loss of its life. Offred appears to be longing for connection with her mother but does not receive it, and she starts to look for the same sort of connecting in other relationships instead.

Before Gilead, Offred used to value love and longed to live a family life. One can understand this longing as her lost object of desire. In other words, Offred appears to have been searching for solace in traditional gender roles and believed that she would feel complete again if finding what she was missing as a child. However, since what she was missing as a child in fact was her lost connection with her mother, it is impossible to achieve the feeling of complete fulfillment again. When Offred reminisces about her life before Gilead, she asks herself how they "were to know they were happy" (Atwood 61).

The longing for female bonding appears to be the same throughout the novel, and another relationship Offred used to value before Gilead is the friendship with Moira. However, as Moira is no longer with her, and even though friendship is non-existent in Gilead, Offred searches for it in Serena, the Marthas, and the other Handmaids. This can be seen as another of her lost objects of desire: relationships to make her feel complete again.

The Giver's Jonas is affected by the Mirror Stage differently. As stated by Latham, there is no need for mirrors in Jonas's community since everyone looks and acts in the same way, as a result of the community's state of Sameness:

If we consider the lack of mirrors in Jonas's community metaphorically, we may conclude that this community does not value discrete individuals but instead prefers to function as a single, amorphous entity. And, in fact, that is largely the case. In addition then to the blurring of the distinction between children and adults, there is a blurring between all individuals. It is the community, not the individual, that matters.

(Latham, 10)

In other words, the community citizens have not entered the Mirror Stage, and since they still experience the world like one unit, they are not searching for any lost objects of desire.

At the beginning of the novel, Jonas still belongs to the community's Sameness and has not entered the Mirror Stage yet. However, through the memories from the Giver he learns of the world containing different people and individual choices and finally starts to experience himself as his own being, separate from everyone in the community's Sameness. In other words, he begins individuating along with the memories of before and finally enters the Mirror Stage. With the Mirror Stage comes his lost object of desire, which he appears to find partly in baby Gabriel. Exactly like Offred is searching for human connection, Jonas is searching for a bonding based on love. Since the people in his community cannot feel, separating from the community and its people becomes essential for him. Because of this, Jonas' and Gabriel's escape from the community can be seen as resistance to the state, and a search for his lost object of desire, a loving family bond.

To conclude, both Offred and Jonas are searching for the loving connection experienced in the Mirror Stage. It is interesting to note that both of them appear to be searching for this in meaningful relationships. In other words, they appear to be searching for the loving family bonds they were missing in their upbringing. In turn, this suggests a protest against their parents and social engineering of their societies.

4.3 *The Backlash Effect as Protest*

The novels depict the children's rebellion against their parents as a form of resistance to the state-constructed families. *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays two different resistance movements.

The first one is the general backlash against the feminist movement in the 1980s and the second one is Offred's individual rebellion against her mother.

Offred's generation was labeled postfeminists by the media (Feldman Kołodziejuk 69). Many of the postfeminists had troubles identifying with the culture their mothers had created and wanted to distance themselves from the feminist movement. Their mothers had done everything in their power to change the traditional gender roles and expectations of women. However, many postfeminists "glorified pregnancy, birth and motherhood" (Feldman Kołodziejuk 73), and ended up wishing for the traditional family lives their mothers had tried to distance themselves from. Offred remembers her childhood as "subject to makeshift and decampment" and longed for "a life more ceremonious" (Atwood 190), which she certainly got in Gilead.

Many postfeminists were uninterested in feminism and politics and chose to focus on careers and family life instead. Offred remembers the time before Gilead:

Is that how we lived then? But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time ...
We lived as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. (Atwood 66)

As this quotation shows, Offred and many of her friends tried to ignore what was happening in society. Many of them even wished for a more ceremonious life, and therefore they did not oppose the radical right's promotion of a return to traditional values, as it was something they partly wanted too. Statements like "little has yet been done to disturb the idea that under the best of all circumstances, the best place for young children is in the home under mother's care" (Rossi 22) gave power to the right-wing, who "called for the restoration of women's traditional roles and for the return of women to the home" (Bouson 135). In short, the backlash against the feminist movement made the creation of Gilead possible.

Offred had a complicated relationship to her mother and often opposed her way of mothering:

I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms. I didn't want to be a

model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once. (Atwood 132)

In other words, it appears like Offred's mother expected her daughter to continue her activism and seems to have been disappointed when she chose not to do so. As suggested by Feldman Kołodziejuk: "having redefined the traditional notion of woman as wife and mother, [some of the] second-wave feminists found the next generation's traditional choices exasperating" (72). "You're just a backlash" (Atwood 131) Offred's mother once told her:

You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are ... Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far? (Atwood 131)

As is obvious here, Offred and her mother clearly had very different opinions, and they sometimes had trouble understanding each other.

In contrast to the lack of stability in her childhood, Offred provided a stable home with two loving parents for her daughter. The smell of home baked bread awakens her memories of her life before:

The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers, although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother". (Atwood 57).

As shown here, Offred appears to have been a loving and caring mother, who connected maternal care to house chores such as home baking and cooking.

Even if *The Handmaid's Tale* is not an obvious example of a Bildungsroman, it is clear that it is a novel about a woman in the process of maturing (Feldman Kołodziejuk 74). At the beginning of the novel, Offred often appears to be thinking like a child. She still seems disappointed with her mother and blames her for not being the mother she needed her to be. However, as the novel unfolds, Offred realizes that her mother did the best she could and that her mother's activism stemmed from a place of love:

No mother is ever the child's complete idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well. But despite everything, we didn't do badly by one another, we did as well as most. I wish she was here, so I could tell her I finally know this. (Atwood 190)

This is an important part of Offred's maturation, and this realization appears to help her find peace in her relationship to her mother. As feminist psychologist Chodorow explains:

For the infant, the mother is not someone with her own life, wants, needs, history, other social relationships, work. She is known only in her capacity as mother. Growing up means learning that she, like other people in one's life, has and wants a life of her own, and that loving her means recognizing her subjectivity and appreciating her separateness. But people have trouble doing this and continue, condoned and supported by the ideology about mothers they subsequently learn, to experience mothers solely as people who did or did not live up to their child's expectations. (90)

Since the broken mother-daughter relationships seem to have been part of the postfeminists' inability to interpret and combat the changes that led to Gilead, this healing is crucial for the plot of the novel. It allows Offred to let go of the past and focus on gathering strength for a new backlash and fight back against Gilead.

The backlash effect plays an essential role in the parent-child relationships in *The Giver* as well. However, in *The Giver*, Jonas first appears to be content in his relationship with his parents, but it soon becomes clear that something is missing. When Jonas is introduced to the memory of a loving family with grandparents, he tells the Giver that he "liked the feeling of love" and that the family in the memory seemed "a little more complete" (Lowry 126). The same evening Jonas asks his parents if they love him, and they reply that love is meaningless. Jonas seems disappointed by this and admits to himself that he never "felt anything as meaningful as the memory" (Lowry 127). After the interaction with his parents, Jonas says to Gabriel:

“Things could change, Gabe,” Jonas went on. “Things could be different. I don’t know how, but there must be some way for things to be different. There could be colors.”
 “And grandparents,” he added, (Lowry 128).

As shown here, Jonas appears to be longing for a more loving relationship. He appears to be questioning his parents’ parenting and starts to develop a resistance against them.

Jonas longs for the love he experienced in the loving family memory. Just like Offred, he is starting to feel that his parents are not giving him what he needs and starts to rebel against his parents and the state which created the community. Like Offred, Jonas wants to have a family that is bonded together in love, and as the novel unfolds, he starts to form loving relationships with other people than his parents. The first person he finds this in is the Giver, and the second one Gabriel, who sleeps next to his bed as he seems to “like it in Jonas’s room” (Lowry 128). Every evening Jonas shares some of the beautiful memories he has received from the Giver with Gabriel, much like parents read to calm the kids in the evening, and slowly starts to take on a maternal role. When Jonas learns about Gabriel’s planned killing, he decides to escape with him. He wants to give him the chance to live, and a better childhood than the one he himself had, just like Offred tries to give her daughter the love and security she was missing as a child.

Unlike *The Handmaids Tale*, *The Giver* is the perfect example of a Bildungsroman, as it clearly shows how Jonas matures from a child to a young adult. He experiences the stages of puberty and matures as he learns about love. As the novel goes on, Jonas matures, and just like Offred, he leaves his childhood behind. As concluded by Latham, “he is moving not just beyond the innocence associated with a particular stage of life, but beyond the “innocence” of his entire community” (10). Just like Offred first did against her mother, Jonas rebels against his parents and the state that created the community. With this rebellion, he manages to gather the strength to escape from the community.

To conclude, both Offred and Jonas rebel against their parents. Jonas’ parents not having any feelings, due to being lured into taking pills, contrasts against Offred’s mother trying to change the world for her daughter, even though it appears she became preoccupied while doing so. Just like her mother tried to create a better world for Offred, Offred tries to create a better life for her daughter by attempting to escape Gilead. As Offred matures and learns to accept her mother, she realizes that her mother tried to do what she thought was best for her child, just like she did herself. Even if Jonas’ does not have this kind of

realization, he appears to know that his parents do not know better and instead focuses on doing the best for Gabriel. Thus, the healing of their mother-child relationships becomes a form of resistance against their societies, which appears to be the final backlashes against their dystopian societies.

5 Conclusion

This essay has shown how the mother-child relationships of the dystopian novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Giver* are depicted. The analysis of the works has clarified that the psychological concerns projected in the novels are more or less the same, being the fear of how the broken bond between mother and child could affect society and showing that social roles are less important than love. The comparison of the novels has shown how the societies attempt to control and perfect the idea of the traditional nuclear family to solve the crisis of the declining versus rising birth rates. It has shown how this fails with their use of Handmaid and Birthmothers, which force both biological and legal parents into parenting roles and demonstrated how this break the natural bond between mother and child, which ideally is a bond of love and care.

It has shown that both Offred and Jonas appear to be searching for their lost objects of desire, being maternal love, in relationships around them. Using the concept of the backlash effect, it has shown how the backlash against the feminist movement and the postfeminists rebellions against their mothers, made the creation of Gilead possible. It has also shown how Jonas rebels against his parents and the state, as a protest against his society. Lastly, it has demonstrated how Offred's and Jonas' maturation throughout the novels help them find peace in their relationships with their parents, which allows them to protest against their societies. In this way, maternal love becomes an act of resistance towards motherhood's rigid distinctions in their dystopian societies.

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