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Confronting the Absurd: Themes of Power and Meaning in Margaret Atwood's Dystopias

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the absurdist themes in Margaret Atwood's novels; The Handmaid's Tale, Oryx and Crake, and The Year of the Flood. Building on the concept from the work of Albert Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus this paper explores how Atwood's characters contend with the inherent meaninglessness and absurdity of their worlds. These novels represent societies in which totalitarian and post-ecological contexts reproduce entropy and oppression conditions that mirror existence's absurdity on interpersonal and social levels.

In the context of the present study, thematic discussions revolve around the ontological dilemmas with Offred, Snowman, Toby, and Ren as representing characters living in post-apocalyptic worlds defined by power relations, lack of control, and perhaps moral grey zones. The special focus is on their attitudes toward absurdity starting with submission and ending with rebellion.

Therefore, this paper aims to analyse the philosophical motifs of Atwood's speculative fiction by identifying absurdism as the main philosophical ground of the genre. It proposes that Atwood's dystopias not only critique societal structures but also reflect on the resilience and vulnerability of people facing the absurd.

Keywords: Absurdism, Dystopian Literature, Power, Resistance, Identity

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Hypothesis

Margaret Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* reflect the absurdity of existence through characters' struggles with power, identity, and resistance, illustrating the tension between humanity's search for meaning and the inherent meaninglessness of their worlds, as framed by Albert Camus's philosophy of absurdism.

Introduction

Albert Camus in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus* turns to Absurdism, in which he examines man's struggle to search for meaning and the universe's indifference to this struggle. This particular philosophical paradigm can be seen to echo in dystopian literature where the characters are stuck in oppressive structures. The population creates its absurdities and, following Camus's concept of rebellion, fights against the hope of inserting the passive nature of suffering into the dystopian worlds.

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Few writers today write speculative fiction as well as Margaret Atwood, and through her novels, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood gives voice to such struggles. These works delve into, societies that are under dictatorships, an environmentally degrading world, and a world whose morality is in a constant state of shift, providing a vast backdrop to develop absurdism.

This paper looks at the manner in which Atwood's dystopias relate to the philosophical question of absurdism primarily through the theme of power, identity, and resistance. The present study employs The Myth of Sisyphus as the theoretical framework, it will seek to investigate how the characters of Atwood confront the absurdity of their existence and whether their responses align with Camus's philosophy of rebellion.

Review of Literature

The Myth of Sisyphus (1942) by Albert Camus is a hallmark work of absurdism that looks for a solution to the problem of the meaning of life and asserts that human life is, in fact, meaningless. Camus's study of the absurd is used as a framework for understanding the characters created by Atwood because they face oppressive and frequently illogical systems.

Coral Ann Howells in Margaret Atwood's Dystopic Fiction: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* (2006) offers a comparative study of Atwood's dystopian novels to show how her narratives engage with and challenge current cultural concerns and technological developments. Howells' work correlates with this research through the dystopian themes she explores; nevertheless, her study lacks an absurdist perspective thereby opening up the opportunity for extending these frameworks to better understand the complexity of the power and identity critique Atwood constructs.

Madelaine Davis's *Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies: Power and Identity in Dystopian Contexts* (2006) delves into what extent and in what ways Atwood represents women's bodies as relating to power and subjectivity in dystopic communities. Davis's production could be said to enrich the debate in relation to body and power that is at the core of Atwood's dystopian texts. Nevertheless, being entirely committed to the examination of feminist concerns, Davis omits existential aspects of identity and power, which are investigated in this study employing absurdist theories.

Identity in Crisis: The Absurd Self

In Margaret Atwood's dystopian novels, identity is a fragile object, always at risk of annihilation in the hands of the violent systems that constitute the setting in which the protagonists struggle to exist. This is, in a very real sense, an identity crisis, just like the one Albert Camus explores in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where he discusses the existence of the absurd in a world without meaning. Where Atwood's characters are similarly thrown back against a wall in this dissonance, so much so that their individuality is constantly sapped and withered at the door of the structures that surround them and within, becoming functionaries in a machine that does not acknowledge, or even intrinsically value personal identity (Foucault, 1975). In a world where it seems as though these forces care little for an autonomous or agentic individual, the struggle to maintain such a personal identity is in itself an absurd endeavour. (Camus, 1942)

The Handmaid's Tale is about the experience of identity in crisis, and Offred is a powerful example of it. First, her name is taken from her, along with the rest of her past and her entire family, erased by the theocratic regime of Gilead, reducing her to only that for which she is being used; she is a "Handmaid." She's a vessel in a way, someone whose only worth comes from this one biological function, and viewed as a mere animal with no humanity. The main source of her internal struggle is this denial of herself, she has all the fragments of her former self, keeping one thing hidden, her name for example. Offred's attempt to resist Gilead's erasure of her personal history parallels Camus's concept of the absurd: in a world where she is so far outside of her normality that nobody wants her for the person she is, she finds herself compelled to remember that. This conflict between who she is and what Gilead insists she has become exemplifies Camus's vision of the absurd self: fighting a constant war, fighting an arbitrary and dehumanising world.

Also, in *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman's sense of existential despair mirrors the lack of an identity in the face of isolation and a cold world. Snowman (formerly Jimmy) finds himself lost in a landscape far from the normal and becomes isolated in the present and the past, as his life and understanding of who he is starts fading. When living in solitude, he submits himself to a degree of self-appraisal wherein a stripped-down world with no familiar societal structures leaves him confronted with his own insignificance. This echoes Camus's statement, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (p123, Camus, 1942). This is described until the end of the novel which finds Snowman hanging on to whatever he can of past life, with Oryx, Crake, and that world that does not exist anymore. His efforts to remember and narrate his story is an absurdist effort to cling to meaning when reality affords none, his intellectual consciousness boils down to a desperate search for something important to keep him from falling into the abyss. This would be a literal embodiment of the absurd self, a product of what he has lost and what he wants to keep of himself amid the desolation.

The God's Gardeners cult in *The Year of the Flood* seems benign and showcases how power operates, frequently on an absurd and often contradictory level. Rather than making some sense of the environmentalism and apocalyptic prophecies mixed within, they give themselves a safe, sanctuary from the outside world that turns out to be unfathomably confusing. Members of the Gardeners are to adhere to strict, arbitrary rules under the leadership of moral authority figures whose directives tend to seem paradoxical. As an example, the Gardeners declare themselves non-violent but tolerate violent ends as inevitable, which results in a kind of fatalistic surrender, not unlike Camus's absurdity of existence. Power in this world isn't something to bow down to, it's more of a nebulous influence that demands submission to a belief system that doesn't give you any agency.

This presents the crux of these dystopias: the inherent instability of authority. In each of these worlds, power is run in a manner that forces individuals to relinquish personal autonomy, to abide by whatever rules or figures are imposed. It is also how Camus interprets human beings' desire for order and reason, only to encounter a world that mocks such coherence. Atwood provides a critique of power structures as absurd in showing that authority, like identity, does not exist outside of arbitrary systems, it is also weak and fundamentally irrational.

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Absurdist Themes: Alienation and Isolation

Alienation and isolation are central themes in the novels as well, and they are occasionally the result of the absurdist conditions her characters must endure. This extends to Camus's notion of the absurd building on the idea that isolation is an integral part of the human condition.

The Handmaid's Tale constructs Offred's alienation carefully by bringing the regime to light. Offred is physically as well as emotionally isolated from everyone she knows, stripped of personal relationships, isolated from friends and family, and unable to trust anyone around her. It is part of the Gilead system to use that inflicted alienation so that it can be used to control, with strict rules that keep women from even forging bonds, let alone sharing confidences (Foucault, 1975). Atwood mirrors Camus's idea that alienation is inevitable in a world that prohibits any sense of human connection.

In The Year of the Flood, Toby and Ren experience isolation from society and also each other. Isolation is physical and mental for Toby, she has to renounce her prior identity with the God's Gardeners cult. However, Ren experiences isolation from her life in the Pleeblands because in those parts of the world, superficial connections are normal, and true human connection is rare. Yet even in all of the people, she is profoundly alone because she is trapped in a world where interactions are viewed as transactions. This mirrors Camus's absurdist worldview that people are alone in a universe that pays no attention to their desire for companionship or understanding.

Oryx and Crake continues this theme by charting people surviving in a post-apocalyptic landscape where isolation is a burden and a survival tool. Previously Jimmy, now Snowman, became alienated from humans, and humanity as he once knew it. In Snowman's dealings with the bio-engineered Crakers, he finds himself dealing with an extreme version of existential isolation, as he cannot fully communicate or meaningfully connect with them. In the absurdist struggle of his loneliness, he hangs onto memories of a world that exists no longer and is currently with people who know nothing of him. This is similar to Camus's belief that isolation is not a physical state so much as it is purely philosophical: as one exists in a state of affability from the surrounding world.

Atwood's dystopias, through these layered portrayals of alienation and isolation, expose the absurdity of human existence. Her characters' longing for connection in worlds that actively prevent it speaks to the fundamental absurdist paradox: the wish to have unity and coherence in a reality that has in its offer only separation and ambiguity.

Identity and Power as Fluid Contrasts

In Atwood's dystopian novels identity and power are not fixed, but shown to be forces that can be decoded in a variety of ways based on circumstance and individual resilience and malleability. The fluidity of this also denotes the absurdist idea that meaning and essence are perverted, often changing into something that defies any coherent, stable form (Barthes, 1977). Characters within Atwood's works inhabit worlds of changing identity and power, to both serve and be controlled, depending upon their situation and external affinities.

The identity of a Handmaid in The Handmaid's Tale is an imposed construct on Offred but within this role, she manages to reclaim these bits of her sense of self, pieces of her identity.

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So the Gileadean regime reduces women to rigid, reductive identities: Handmaid, and Wife, each brought on to destroy individuality and to keep control. Thus, in turn, her ('Offred's') power is, too, fluid, oscillating between subjugation and subtle kinds of rebellion, like her secret relationship with Nick or her secret thoughts that evade the control of the regime. Her power to play into the system long enough to twist her identity and navigate the moment of hidden resistance means that she maintains a sliver of power however small that may be in a system built to disempower her. Atwood shows how personal agency springs from the power to redefine oneself in and against oppressive structures, not through individualistic magic (as in Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead), but through a fragmenting of identity.

As in Oryx and Crake, identity and power are unstable and depicted in the fractured personas of Snowman (formerly Jimmy) and Crake. Snowman's relationship with Crake is marked by a complex power dynamic that shifts over time: Crake's power in bio-engineering gives him tremendous power, although deeply immoral. Still, when society crumbles, Snowman's status within the Crakers is one of quasi-mythic status, of having fashioned himself into a quasi-mythological figure or man of survival and adaptation. The idea that identity and power are not qualities that an individual either has or doesn't, but things that are done as necessary for the context in which they are in, becomes clear through the shifting roles of Snowman. A breakdown in the laws of society makes him transform from a passive observer to a reluctant guide, affirming the absurdity of identity (Jameson, 1991).

In The Year of the Flood, Toby and Ren's identities are defined by their encounter within the power structures of God's Gardeners cult and the exploitative corporations. Toby's survival is the act of having to constantly negotiate who she is; surviving while being owned and exploited by corporations, and then becoming a healer and leader in the Gardeners. She adapts skills and personas to perceived environmental needs, and her identity functions according to these needs, shifting as the demands of an idiosyncrasy like her modern world demands (Jameson, 1991). Like Ren, the fluidity of identity in response to power is a theme of her journey too; born within the Gardeners, then exploited as a dancer in the Pleeblands, she learns how to manipulate who and what she is perceived as, doing so to maintain a degree of autonomy. As demonstrated by the mutability of identity and power in the lives of these characters, Atwood critiques society's arbitrary structures, upon which one must rely to redefine what one thinks of oneself.

Absurdity in Characters' Lives

Like the futility of existence expounded upon by Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus, the characters are forced by oppressive structures and rigid roles to live lives bereft of individuality and purpose. All of these protagonists are put through a life of outer control and actions that never meet the inner desire of the person (Barthes, 1967).

The protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred, symbolises struggle; a woman whose reason for existence has been reduced to producing children. Offred, a 'Handmaid' in theocratic society of Gilead, has no right to basic liberties and personal autonomy. Her daily life revolves around highly controlled rituals: shopping with other Handmaids, going through the 'Ceremony' rituals only to procreate, and being under strict surveillance so she cannot revolt. Her love for a meaningful life collides with a society that recognises only her as a reproductive vessel. Through Offred, Atwood gives us a distilled version of the absurdity of a life stripped

of the ability to determine anything for yourself, which the Gilead's rigid social codes impose on all the Handmaids.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the type of life Jimmy, later renamed "Snowman", lived at the beginning, looks privileged but turns out empty and isolating. Jimmy grew up in a corporatised world where science and corporate interests outshine human connection; the world is genetically engineered, and it's an unfortunate place to live in. His entire life until now, however, has been marked by a momentum of transient relationships, but always with feelings of emotional detachment, even with his own closest friends, Oryx and Crake. Jimmy is all alone after humanity has collapsed; left to forage his existence surrounded by genetically modified creatures. He has a new identity, as 'Snowman,' and his daily tasks involve looking for food, staying alive from bioengineered predators, and the search for his purpose as presumably the last human; all of this parallels Camus' idea of the absurd. Jimmy is like Sisyphus condemned to roll his boulder, endlessly in repetitive meaningless tasks, a shredded ghost of a past long gone and unable to find solace in the present. And that life of having lost both human companionship and purpose has been made absurd by his existence.

In *The Year of the Flood*, Toby, and Ren try to survive an environmentally degraded and socially collapsed ravaged world. The dysfunction of this existence is personified by Toby, who lives by working in a spa under the authoritarian CorpSeCorps and who survives physical and mental deterioration. Toby joins the eco-religious group, God's Gardeners, finding practices and beliefs that mirror something akin to purpose, but which are quite isolated from the vicious reality of Toby's life. Ren, too, is bound by her environment, as a dancer in a swish spot club, objectified and commodified. Both live large, busy lives, living with tasks that lack purpose or that seem dictated by things beyond their control. Although their lives involve struggles of their own, they make plain how absurdity pervades every sector of their life; survival routines, search for comfort, and meaning in faith and community. No matter what they try to do, whether by escape or therapy or even having a romantic relationship, Toby and Ren constantly bump up against the absolute pointlessness of existing in dystopia.

Organised around the themes of external control and existential absurdity, each of these narratives represents the characters trapped in lives reminiscent of the absurdity Camus talked about. Learning and being isolated, fragmented individuals performing repetitive tasks shows that these beings have a hard time finding coherence in worlds that forbid it. Atwood's characters react variously to the absurdity of their existence from passive acceptance to acts of resistance, from quests to recreate meaning to the realisation that it's futile. Atwood's use of her subjects is not only to display the absurdity that is built into dystopian societies but also to invite us to consider our own abilities to be resilient and positive in the face of oppressive societal powers that try to place restrictions on our personal autonomy and selfhood.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novels—*The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*—offer profound explorations of the absurd, as framed by Albert Camus's philosophy. Through the lens of absurdism, the crisis of identity emerges as a central theme, where characters struggle to define themselves in worlds that deny them agency and stability.

This crisis is deepened by pervasive feelings of alienation and isolation, as characters grapple with their disconnection from both societal structures and personal meaning.

The fluidity of power dynamics further complicates these identities, as individuals oscillate between positions of submission and resistance. This interplay highlights the precarious nature of existence in Atwood's dystopias. The analysis of the characters' lives reveals how the absurd is not only an internal struggle but also a reflection of their external realities. Offred's quiet defiance, Snowman's solitude, and Toby's resilience exemplify the tension between meaninglessness and the desire for purpose in a world of chaos and control.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that the hypothesis is proven: Atwood's dystopias vividly portray the absurdity of existence through the characters' struggles with identity, alienation, power, and meaning. By aligning with Camus's philosophy, Atwood's characters embody rebellion—not as a solution to the absurd but as a way to navigate its inescapable presence. Her works, therefore, not only reflect the challenges of living in a chaotic world but also celebrate the resilience of the human spirit in the face of absurdity.

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