

MA Literature Today

Contemporary female-centred dystopian fiction

An analysis of Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) and Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks* (2018) compared to Margaret Atwood's canonical *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)

Kelly van der Meulen (5522609)
1-1-2018

Content

Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Chapter One: <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	8
Chapter Two: <i>The Power</i>	16
Chapter Three: <i>Red Clocks</i>	26
Chapter Four: Comparison.....	32
Conclusion	39
Works Cited	44

Abstract

This thesis aims to analyse two contemporary female-centred dystopian novels, namely Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks* (2018) and Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) and compare them to Margaret Atwood's canonical *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The comparison will be based on grounds of religious elements, the narration and young adult characteristics. Religion has proven to be important to all three books, although in different ways. Similarly, there are both similarities and differences in the narration of the three novels, which can partly be related back to the intended audience of these works. Lastly, the characteristics of young adult dystopian fiction are studied, as this subgenre has become incredibly popular over the past decade, but also is in many ways very similar to female-centred dystopian fiction. By combining these three elements, this thesis aims to provide a first insight into how female-centred dystopian literature has changed over the past thirty years. This leads to the major conclusions that Atwood's work is still very canonical and influential in the modern society, as links between her work and *The Power* and *Red Clocks* are everywhere; both in the texts, reviews, and in how these books are marketed. Secondly, both *The Power* and *Red Clocks* provide more diverse perspectives than *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both recent books make use of multiple, very diverse perspectives, whereas *The Handmaid's Tale* was narrated and focalized by a single protagonist. This ensures that both *The Power* and *Red Clocks* are readable and relatable for a far larger and more diverse audience and can therefore spread their message to a larger amount of people.

Introduction

The Women's March in 2017 was perhaps not the first, but it is certainly one of the biggest marches in history (*Women's March*). A day before the March, the streets of Washington filled with people who had gathered to watch the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States. The Women's March was organized as a response to his election and inauguration. Many agreed that the election of Donald Trump would be far from beneficial for women and their rights as he had made multiple sexist statements during his campaign. The Women's March famously attracted a far larger number than Trump's inauguration had attracted a day earlier. The March, however, was not limited to Washington, but took place in many cities throughout the United States, and even on other continents. It is one of many examples of the past years of how women's rights have been threatened, but also of how there have been protests against these threats.

A month after Trump's inauguration, he was again critiqued after a photograph appeared of Donald Trump, signing a new law that allowed states to cut funding for abortions, in an office filled with only men. It was met with much critique as an issue, that primarily concerns women, was decided upon by men only. As a way of protesting, the Swedish deputy prime minister posted a picture of herself, signing a new law in an office filled with women only (The Guardian, "Trolling Trump").

Such protests by women to political and legal measures threatening women's freedom show that women's rights are still fought for. The concerns raised are global, even if the examples above refer primarily to the United States. The Women's March, which was repeated in 2018, shows that these are very much contemporary issues. It is therefore no surprise that these concerns have found their way into literature as well.

Since long, dystopian literature has provided a way to not only imagine a worst-case scenario, but to provide critique on contemporary society through imagining the worst. George Orwell's classic dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four* finds its roots in the increase in control over inhabitants and the glooming threat of communism as was experienced in 1948, when Orwell wrote the novel. A more recent example is Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2012), which was based on the ever-growing impact of social media on our lives, and how this has both positive and negative effects.

The history of dystopian literature is long. The twentieth century, however, proves to be a major turning point with a vast increase in dystopian works. On the one hand, the 1960s made way for a "utopian revival" (Fitting 124), both in utopian writing and in utopian studies. Yet there was also a vast increase in the amount of dystopian texts written. There was an increasing sense that the world was becoming less like an utopia. With two World Wars, an escalation of the amount of totalitarian societies and the Cold War, fiction turned darker and dystopian fiction got the upper hand. Although its narrative structures and devices are similar to that of utopian literature, dystopian literature provides futuristic images as "real possibilities because the utopist wants to frighten the reader and to make him realize that things may go either right or wrong, depending on the moral, social and civic responsibility of the citizens" (Vieira 17).

The twentieth century thus proved to be very important for both dystopian work, and the study of these works. The word 'dystopia' first enters the discourse in 1868 (Claeys 107), although it is now also used to classify works written before that. As a result of the increase of utopian and dystopian studies, new subgenres arise, and with that, women get a voice in utopian literature too. Although the first works that classify as feminist dystopian fiction are found in the early twentieth century, with works such as Charlotte Haldane's *Man's World* (1927), feminist dystopian fiction experienced a surge in the 1970s (Calvacanti 49). The real

spike in feminist dystopian fiction came in 1969, with no less than six female-centred dystopian texts published in that year alone. It is from this point onwards that one can speak of a definite turn in the dystopian tradition (49).

The most canonical example of this subgenre is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Although it was far from the first in its tradition, it certainly is the work that has had the most impact on our cultural memory and thus acquired a canonical reputation that is not unlike that of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World*. Her book tells the story of the theological republic Gilead, where birth rates have gone down significantly. In an attempt to save the future of the human race, the

government has ruled all fertile women to be put under the rule of a Commander, with one single purpose: to get pregnant. They are denied their own name, access to literature or even the news, and have been reduced to the property of a Commander. Her novel obviously struck a chord



with many readers as the TV adaptation was released in 2017, and gained a massive audience. The second season of the TV series started in April 2018. Both the novel and the series have proven to be such a success, that at protests such as the afore mentioned Women's March, women have shown up dressed as handmaids (Hauser). Dressed in crimson red cloaks, white bonnets and with bowed heads, they have been providing silent protests to new developments. In Ireland, this past spring women dressed as handmaids to show their stance in the referendum about the ban on abortions (Garschagen). They have succeeded; abortion is now legal in Ireland. These protesters show that a novel, that was based on developments in society, has found its way back into society.

The protestors in Ireland, and for that matter, protesters all over the world, also show that the fight for women's rights is far from over. As the Women's Marches continue, writers continue to write about these matters. A very recent example of a book, that has also been referred to as this era's *The Handmaid's Tale*, is *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas (2018). It centres around four women living in what is presented as the United States in the near future. Abortion is forbidden and legally defined as murder. It is by law forbidden for single parents to raise children. In this world, we hear the stories of The Mender, The Daughter, The Wife and The Biographer. Although they do not name their own names, we learn more about each character through the relationships they have with other characters. While the world they live in is far from ideal, each woman manages to create her own happy ending, in one way or another.

The connections to Atwood in contemporary examples of feminist dystopian fiction do not end at *Red Clocks*. The winner of the Bailey's Prize for Women's Fiction in 2017 was *The Power* by Naomi Alderman (2016). The novel raises the question: what if women were in power? Women in this novel suddenly gain a mysterious, electromagnetic power that allows them to provide a deadly charge from their fingertips. The scales are flipped and now women are, literally and metaphorically, in power. Yet as the power spreads and women take over, men become increasingly oppressed. War breaks out and Alderman shows that this society is as undesirable as the patriarchal society she criticizes. Interesting to note is that Margaret Atwood was a mentor to Naomi Alderman as she wrote this novel.

In this thesis, I aim to look at the other connections between this very canonical work by Margaret Atwood, and these two contemporary examples by Leni Zumas and Naomi Alderman. In addition to this, I will also look at the differences between them. The literary world has changed in the past thirty years, and although Atwood's book has proven to still be very relevant, there could be elements that do not apply as much anymore to a contemporary

audience. Therefore I will aim to draw up some characteristics of contemporary female-centred dystopian fiction, by looking at these two examples. I have chosen to use the term female-centred rather than feminist, as this widens the scope of literary influences that come into play when analysing these works. I will compare these two novels to Margaret Atwood's classic example, on three major grounds: religion, narration and young adult elements. This choice is based on various reasons. Religion is an element that is very visible in all three novels, albeit in very different ways. Narration is of course an important element of every literary work, but the two more modern examples have proven to be drastically different in some narratological elements. This provides an interesting dynamic to the three novels. Lastly, these novels operate in a discourse that is now heavily influenced by young adult fiction. Young adult has experienced an incredible surge in popularity over the past decade, and many of these works feature a dystopian society with a strong, female lead. Although literary critics have often condemned the genre, the massive sales numbers are undeniable and it is therefore interesting to see how these two modern novels operate in this discourse after it has become so popular. I will use *The Handmaid's Tale* as a canonical example in this subgenre, as her work has both been very influential and gathered a very large audience. Together, this will form a first attempt to analyse and categorise the changes that have occurred in female-centred dystopian fiction between 1985 and 2016.

Chapter One: *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Handmaid's Tale is the story of Offred, a handmaid in the patriarchal Republic of Gilead. Women in Gilead have been divided into four categories. The Handmaids are young, fertile women, capable of bearing children and therefore needed to ensure that the rapidly declining birth-rate rises again. They have been reduced to being property of Commanders and exist solely for the purpose of bearing children. Their names, like Ofglen and Offred, are direct reminders of their status, meaning 'Of Glen', or 'Of Fred'. Their real names are no longer used and they cannot leave their house except for monthly shopping trips. The Aunts are unmarried or infertile women who train and indoctrinate the Handmaids. The Marthas are the servants, and the Unwomen are those who, by choice or not, do not fall in any of the categories and are banned from everyday life to work as prisoners. The women are kept under strict control: they are not allowed to read or watch the news, to keep them obedient and quiet. Through violence and withholding information, the women are kept under control, although there is mention of a rebellion multiple times.

Offred is a Handmaid, and although she starts the beginning of the story by reminiscing about her days with her husband and her life before the new regime, she eventually develops a sort of friendship with her Commander through playing Scrabble-games and reading magazines. Both of these are forbidden items and activities for Handmaids, as women are not allowed to read. Offred recounts her life as a Handmaid, her friendships with other Handmaids who had tried to go against the system, but had ultimately failed. Her Commander is suspected to be infertile and as a result, Offred is forced to sleep with his driver so that she can get pregnant. They sleep together regularly, and Offred gets caught between both relationships. Her narrative ends with the arrival of a black van, which she assumes to be of the secret police, to apprehend her for her crimes. The story ends in

uncertainty: the driver Nick reassures her that the van is there to save her, and Offred meets her fate, whatever that is. The book ends with an epilogue in the form of a transcript on a symposium, held long after the events Offred describes. The symposium is on the story of Gilead as told by Offred, and on its credibility.

It is not a coincidence that Margaret Atwood sat down to write *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1984, the same year that George Orwell described and predicted in his bestselling novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The year 1984 was one of reflection upon Orwell's dystopian novel, and although the picture Orwell painted was a far stretch from reality, many similarities could be drawn between the novel and the historical year. 1984 was the year of the war between Iraq and Iran, the year in which Ayatollah Khomeini forbade women entrance to universities, to have jobs, to show hair or skin in public. That same year in the United States meant the presidency of Ronald Reagan, when one-third of all budget cuts influenced mainly women (Neuman 860). 1984 was above anything a year in which the world, but women in particular realised that equality was still a far stretch, and that Orwell's predictions had more truth in them than they ideally should have. In an interview with *Indigo* Margaret Atwood stated that one of her inspirations was the political context of the early 1980s. "People, even back then, were saying what they would like to do, should they ever have a chance to take power. Now that faction is in power in the United States" (Atwood and Indigo).

Margaret Atwood was greatly influenced by writers of classic dystopias such as George Orwell, Ray Bradbury, Aldous Huxley and H.G. Wells, whom she refers to as "the granddaddy of us all" (Atwood, "Context" 513). These are all canonical writers, especially within the canon of dystopian literature. *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and the works of H.G. Wells are all seen as "key texts which define the genre" (Claeys 109). Atwood herself writes that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a major source of inspiration for her own *The Handmaid's Tale*. This is particularly visible in the epilogue. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ends with

an essay on the indoctrinating language Newspeak. Newspeak is used to indoctrinate the inhabitants by replacing words like 'bad' with 'plusgood' or 'doubleplusgood'. It is assumed that by removing negative words from the language, people are no longer able to express or even think that something is bad as they do not have the means to do so, as language shapes thought (Casasanto 65). Yet the essay on Newspeak at the end of Orwell's book is written in Standard English. This suggests that the society as described in the text has fallen. Similarly, *The Handmaid's Tale* ends with an overview of a symposium in which the stories of Gilead, and Offred in particular are being discussed, likewise suggesting that Gilead has fallen.

Similarly, Atwood writes that *The Handmaid's Tale* was her attempt to write a dystopia from a feminine perspective: "I wanted to try a dystopia from the female point of view- the world according to Julia, as it were" (Atwood, "Context" 516). She states that the majority of dystopias had been written by men, with a male perspective. This is not necessarily true, as especially in the decades before Atwood's novel many feminist dystopian texts were published (Cavalcanti 49). This does show however, that Atwood was influenced primarily by male writers; white male writers. In an interview with CBC Radio she stated that she had not read Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924) at this point, one of the very most influential and canonical dystopian works by a Russian author. Her dystopian reading consisted solely of Anglo-American authors. This proves to be a problematic point. The discourse in which these influential writers operate primarily consists of a Western, male perspective. To an extent, this also appears in *The Handmaid's Tale*. There are no characters of colour in the book; as the theocratic regime is not only sexist but also racist as there is no interest in children of colour. The women suffering, therefore, are all white; it remains unknown what happens to the masses of women and men alike who are not white.

The garb of the handmaids can be interpreted as having been inspired by 17th-century puritanism in New England, as Atwood has stated multiple times. She studied puritanism in

university, and her interest was increased by her personal connection as some of her ancestors were puritans.

One of them was implicated in the witch craft trials somewhat before Salem, but she is in a book by Cotton Mather. That's why *The Handmaid's Tale* is dedicated to Mary Webster. My granny was a Webster. So, I had an interest. I got pretty stuck into it. And American schoolchildren at that time were being told the fantasy that the puritans had come to the new world in search of religious freedom. That is not in fact true. They had come and search freedom for themselves and then proceeded to exile, kick out, whip and hang anybody who didn't fit in with that. (CBC Radio, 00.58:01.51)

The Handmaid's Tale is based on the idea of what a world run by puritans would look like; a world in which religious fanatics got their way. Much like the public witch trials that were common in the 17th century, Gilead holds public trials too. Offred is forced to take part in one of them: the public execution of a man who has been convicted of rape. The handmaids are forced to gather around. They are provoked and forced to strike him: "Despite myself I feel my hands clench. It is too much, this violation. The baby too, after what we go through. It's true, there is a bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 290). Similarly, there is a constant hunt on those who disobey the government. The secret police, the Eyes are constantly looking for those who have disturbed the peace one way or another. They drive around in black vans with a white eye on the side; an image that is again very reminiscent of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Although many of the elements in the novel come from a rather specific group within the Christian religion, there are also many characteristics that are recognisable for a larger group. Every household in Gilead holds a copy of the Bible, locked in a special wooden box. The epigraph of the book is a part of Genesis (30:1-3), where Jacob impregnates two women. This text is taken literally in Gilead, where every Commander has both a wife and a handmaid. The name Gilead is also mentioned in Genesis, as Jacob flees to the country of Gilead (Genesis 31:21-55). One can conclude that Christianity, and puritanism in particular, have played a large role in both Atwood's inspirations behind this novel, and in the text itself.

The text is a constructed narrative within its own fictional universe. Offred suggests as much:

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 144)

As is revealed in the Historical Notes at the end of the text, Offred's story was originally made up of tapes, that had to be put in chronological order and transcribed. As the technology of recording tapes was not available to Offred at the time of the recordings, the recordings must have been made in hind-sight, allowing Offred to reflect on her narrative, too. "It could not have been recorded during the period of time it recounts, if the author is telling the truth, no machine or tapes would have been available to her" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 315). Offred is a homo-diegetic narrator as she narrates events that happened to herself, and adds her thoughts or feelings: "That is how I feel: white, flat, thin" (95).

Offred's homo-diegetic perspective also provides a very subjective perspective on the events of Gilead. Although the story is narrated after the events in the story have taken place, Offred narrates in the present time. Present time implies more accuracy, as changes always happen in reconstructions. Yet Offred does include reflections in her narrative: "It is impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out" (144). Offred admits here that her narration is a subjective, selective, reconstruction of memory (Vevaina 88). This leads to the conclusion that the narrator is unreliable, as it is both implied that the narrator is reliable and accurate, and that she is not. Furthermore, the style of narrating suggests a constructed narrator. For example, Offred often refers to the women in the text with animalistic metaphors (Stein 64). This strengthens her story, as it sets the handmaids even more apart from the rest of the Gilead society than perhaps their red cloaks do. More importantly, it implies that handmaids were not considered as humans; which brings across the message behind the text more. It is therefore safe to assume that the narrator in this text is an unreliable, constructed, homo-diegetic narrator.

In the same line, the reader never learns Offred's real name, even though the narration is recorded after the events in the story. One learns very little about Offred other than that she is capable of giving birth. What one learns about her history, her past before she came to live with the Commander, is told through flashbacks. She is thirty-three in the story, and had a husband and a daughter before Gilead. She provides very little information about her looks, or anything that could help to identify her from others:

But what do we know about her, apart from her age, some physical characteristics that could be anyone's, and her place of residence? Not very much. She appears to have

been an educated woman, insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated. *Laughter*. “But the woods, as you say, were full of these, so that is no help” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 318).

This shows that we learn very little about Offred; she is one of the many, and even the speakers at the symposium cannot find out who she was. Offred does not provide more information for the other characters; from her husband to the Commander and the other handmaids; we learn very little about them through direct characterisation. An argument could be made that this is part of the constructed narration; by providing so little direct information about characters, the story could have applied to any handmaid; showing that they were not only considered inhuman but also all treated the exact same way.

More characterisation is provided indirectly; it can be understood that the Commander starts to care for her as he continuously invites her over, or that Offred is a hopeful person as she never gives up hope that her husband is alive throughout the story.

Age wise, the other characters, e.g. the different handmaids, the Commander and his wife and her husband Jake likely have roughly the same age as Offred. There are no characters in the novel that could be appealing to a young-adult audience.

As shown above, religion plays a very important role in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. There is a direct correlation with puritanism through Margaret Atwood’s puritan ancestors; something that she has referred to in multiple interviews. Gilead as a theocratic Republic obviously has its roots in both puritanism and religious fanaticism in general, and the text is littered with Christian imagery. The story is told through a singular perspective; namely that of Offred. As explained above, she is an unreliable, constructed, homo-diegetic narrator of

adult age. Both of these elements are striking when looking at the far more recent examples *The Power* and *Red Clocks*, as will be shown in the next chapters.

Chapter Two: *The Power*

The connections between Margaret Atwood and Naomi Alderman cannot be missed. *The Washington Post* begins their review on *The Power* with “*The Power* is our era’s *Handmaid’s Tale*” (Charles), there is a quote by Atwood on the cover of the book and the reviews on both the cover and the first pages are littered with references to Atwood’s canonical work. It should therefore perhaps not come as a surprise that Alderman not only considers Atwood one of her favourite writers, but was also mentored by Atwood whilst writing *The Power* (Krishna). Yet where Atwood paints a picture of a society that is ultimately a dystopia for women, and which primarily centres around the role of women, Alderman paints a different picture.

The Power is the story of a world where the power balance between men and women shifts in all ways possible when suddenly, a new power spreads amongst women. Initially, it is only the younger women who are able to provide an electric power from their fingertips, strong enough to kill if they would want to. They are able to spark it in older women or those who did not have it before, and soon, all women are now literally empowered. What follows is a world that slowly descends into chaos as it counts down to the inevitable. It turns out that women in power are as good as, or as bad, as men in power. A world war arises, and although the book remains unclear about what it counts down to, it seems like women all together bring about the apocalypse with their power.

The story is framed by letters between two writers: Neil and Naomi. Neil is the writer of the manuscript that makes up the main story in *The Power*. Neil asks Naomi for advice about his hybrid novel, “not quite history, not quite a novel” (Alderman ix), and Naomi, the more dominant of the two, is critical about his story. Neil suggest that before the climactic event in the story, that he refers to as the Cataclysm, women did not have skeins and men

were in power. Naomi, as a woman, finds this viewpoint troubling, and eventually suggests that Neil should perhaps publish it under a woman's name.

In their letters, Neil and Naomi discuss the meaning of gender. Alderman turns a lot of perspectives and assumptions from our world around. Naomi, for example, writes: "I think I'd rather enjoy this 'world run by men' you've been talking about. Surely a kinder, more caring and – dare I say it? - more sexy world than the one we live in" (Alderman x). Such imagery continues throughout the entire manuscript: suddenly, it's boys who are warned not to go out at night alone, as they are always in risk of running into a woman and being raped. Existing fundamentalist governments are overthrown by women, yet continue in the exact same path. The ultimate example is Moldova, where the president's wife takes over after his death and quickly turns the country into a terrifying republic where men are slowly deprived of their rights to travel alone, to hold possessions. Alderman does not write about women alone; she writes about gender.

Gender is a shell game. What is a man? Whatever a woman isn't. What is a woman?
Whatever a man is not. Tap on it and it's hollow. Look under the shells: it's not there.
(Alderman 338)

These views align with what Judith Butler describes as gender performativity. She states that gender is a social construct, an "identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 519). The difference between men and women, so to say, is not based on biological differences, but on how both genders act and are forced to act in society, which further reaffirms their identities. This is exactly what Alderman suggests in her novel. In a society where women get the opportunity to be in power, the end result is similar, if not more

gruesome, to the patriarchal society that we are more acquainted with. She suggests that it is not a matter of who is in charge, but rather that it is the position that creates a gender identity.

Although *The Power* is in this aspect drastically different from *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which gender is not at all discussed this directly, there are also similarities between the novels. Margaret Atwood mentored Naomi Alderman, which is most apparent in the addition of the convent in the novel, which was suggested by Atwood (Armitstead). One of the main protagonists in *The Power* is Allie. After she kills her abusive foster father, she runs and ends up finding a safe place in a convent run by nuns. She calls herself Eve and quickly builds a reputation as a quiet but smart girl. Her following grows as she uses her incredible skill with the power to perform miracles: "Not very many miracles are required. Not for the Vatican, not for a group of highly strung teenage girls cooped up together for months and in fear of their lives"(Alderman 75). Videos of her are spread through YouTube, and she rises to international fame as Mother Eve, the face of the new religion. The convent serves both as an all-female order, where they debate the future of the girls with their new skill, and the place that allows Allie to grow into the most important religious figure in the new world. Although the convent was initially suggested by Atwood, Alderman states that she totally agrees with this addition: "I'm really interested in who gets to tell the story, and of course the last time we rescued ourselves from dark ages, monks were very important" (Armitstead). From Neil's letters, we learn that nuns have also been the only ones to copy documentation from before the Cataclysm; something that he uses an argument to deny their credibility. More importantly, it shows the large role religion plays in *The Power*.

It is not surprising that religion proves to be so important to Alderman. In an interview with *The Guardian*, she explains that her parents were "unorthodox orthodox Jews who brought her up to be intellectually curious but culturally conservative" (Armitstead). Her religion made her time at college difficult, as there was no kosher food offered at college, and

people would mess with her stuff because she was Jewish. Her life after college sent her to New York, where she came into contact with orthodox gays and lesbians, and this made her doubt her religion. Her second novel, *Disobedience*, about a Jewish lesbian who lives in the house of an orthodox rabbi, was published in 2006. This was the final straw for Alderman's religion: "I went into the novel religious and by the end I wasn't. I wrote myself out of it" (Armitstead). Although Judaism is not directly referenced in the novel, it is obvious that, much as for Atwood, religion has been a major source of inspiration for Alderman.

The religious figure Mother Eve, or Allie, is one of the four main protagonists in the book. For the most part, the narrative consists of four perspectives: that of Allie, Roxy, Margot and Tunde. Allie is a mixed-race foster child turned face of the new religion after she gains a following during her time in the convent. One of her followers is Roxy, a fifteen-year-old daughter of a mafia boss who flees London after she has murdered a boy with her powers. She has seen the YouTube videos about Allie, and makes her way to the United States. Roxy's power is not as refined as Allie's, but her raw ability is the strongest anyone has ever seen. She has other resources too, and quickly becomes Allie's right hand. When Allie crosses the ocean for Moldova, now known as Bessapara, Roxy follows but starts her own drugs business on the side. The purple 'glitter' is a drug especially made for women, as it enlarges their ability with the power while also leaving them with a happy, powerful feeling. Her older brother is jealous of her success, and works together with their father to remove Roxy's skein, the muscle that enables the power. Roxy flees into the woods of Bessapara, amazed to be alive and planning for revenge, when she runs into Tunde. Tunde is the single male perspective for most of the book. He is a student but after witnessing one of the very first incidents with the power, he becomes a self-proclaimed journalist and starts to travel the world to document this major change. He witnesses and documents how the world changes, how his rights are diminished and eventually, how his major story has been stolen and

published by a woman. The last major perspective is that of Margot, a small-town politician who quickly rises after the power first makes its appearance. Rather than trying to turn it around, she accepts the change and starts to think of solutions. Most notably, are the North Star Girls Camps, originally intended to help girls control their power to diminish accidents, but eventually turned into military training camps.

The story contains two minor perspectives, too. The first is that of Jocelyn, Margot's eldest daughter. From Margot's perspective, we learn that she has trouble using her power; often, she cannot reach it. Her perspective starts after she has visited Allie, who uses her power to help Jocelyn. Jocelyn is sent out as a soldier to Bessapara, where a war starts brewing. Her perspective disappears when she loses her ability to use the power again. The second minor perspective is that of Darrell, Roxy's older brother. His perspectives start only after he gains the power through Roxy's skein, and disappears when he loses the skein.

The story is divided into multiple parts, that all count down to what one can assume to be the Cataclysm. The first part is titled "Ten years to go", and so it continues to "Can't be more than seven months left". Each part is organised similarly and contains chapters about Allie, Margot, Tunde and Roxy. Although these characters provide their own perspectives on the story, their chapters are not narrated by them. Instead, the book is narrated by an omniscient narrator who narrates all chapters. Allie's first experience is as follows:

She feels the palms of her mother around her own small fingers. She is glad Mr Montgomery-Taylor is not looking at her but instead out through the window, searching for the non-existent rain.

She maketh a channel for the thunderbolt and setteth a path for the storm.

There is a flash of white light. A flicker of silver across his forehead and around his teeth. (Alderman 32)

The focalization in the first two sentences is Allie's, but the third sentence is obviously not narrated by Allie. Similarly, this is the account of Roxy's first experience with the power:

She twists something quite deep inside her chest, as if she'd always known how to do it. He tries to wriggle out of her grip, but it's too late.

She cuppeth the lightning in her hand. She commandeth it to strike.

There's a crackling flash and a sound like a paper snapper. She can smell something a bit like rainstorm and a bit like burning hair. (Alderman 9)

Again, Roxy's focalization runs through the scene, but one sentence falls out of place, is obviously not focalized by her but by the narrator. The narrator appears multiple times throughout the book. There is a section in one of Margot's chapters where the third-person narration switches to second person narration to provide an overview of what is happening, and there are some instances of flashforwards.

The one exception is the final part of the book: "Here it comes". Whereas previously, every chapter was named after the character it represented, the first chapter of this part has no title. This is because it is completely narrated by the omniscient narrator.

These things are happening all at once. These things are one thing. They are the inevitable result of all that went before. The power seeks it outlet. These things have happened before; they will happen again. These things are always happening.

...

In the north, Olatunde Edo and Roxanne Monke wake to hear the rain pounding on the iron roof of their shelter. And in the west Mother Eve, who once went by the name of Allie, looks out at the gathering storm and says to herself, Is it time? And her own self says, Well, duh. (Alderman 319)

This chapter is completely different as it is the first that is very obviously narrated by an omniscient narrator, as it explains both what Jocelyn, Allie, Roxy and Tunde are doing in the exact same moment. It is also striking that the narrator refers to a gathering storm, even though the narrative does not say anything about an actual storm. However, the narrative did mention a storm and lightning when Roxy, Allie and Margot first used their powers: “setteth a path for the storm” (Alderman 32). This reaffirms the idea that the gathering storm is in fact the Cataclysm, brought about by the power of the women. The fact that the narration changes quite abruptly in the final part, and the fact that the narrator’s voice is suddenly way more apparent than before, helps to establish the idea of a climax and raise more suspense towards the ending of the novel.

It is interesting to note that with the exception of Margot, all major protagonists are quite young at the start of the novel, and the narrative is as much about them growing up in a changing world as anything else. Roxy is fifteen at the start of the novel, Tunde is twenty-one and Allie’s age remains unclear, but she is definitely under eighteen as she is still living in foster care. As the narrative spans ten years, starting with the very first incidents of the

power, all the way to the Cataclysm, all protagonists go through major changes in their lives, and as they learn (the girls at least) to use their new power. This narrative structure is very much in line with what happens in young adult literature, which combines political action with “the developmental narrative of adolescence” (Hintz 254). The central character is a child or young adult and a large part of their narrative are the struggles that come with growing up: “scrutiny of their actions, physical pain, sexual turmoil or awakening and exposure in public roles” (256). These elements certainly appear in *The Power*. When we first meet Tunde, we learn that he has recently left puberty and now tries to get a girl, but he is unsure of what to do:

God, but he wants her. He doesn't know exactly what to do. There have only been two girls before her and neither of them became 'girlfriends'. At college they joke about him that he's married to his studies, because he's always so single. He doesn't like it. (Alderman 13)

All of these feelings, his uncertainty and his shame are familiar for a young adult audience and very fitting for young adult literature. Where Tunde experiences shame and sexual awakening, Allie becomes Eve and has to learn how to keep up her new role as her fame spreads throughout the convent and then throughout the world. These are storylines that are perhaps not new, but have certainly become more popular with the rise of young adult fiction in the past decade. *The Power* certainly takes elements that are familiar to those of the incredible successful young adult dystopian texts, that more often than not feature a girl or women as the main protagonist. Many of the girls that feature so strongly in young adult books achieve a new power of some sort. Katniss Everdeen, protagonist of *The Hunger*

Games, is the first to win the annual Hunger Games together with a partner, and as such, becomes the face of the rebellion against the government, much as Allie becomes the face of the new religion in *The Power*. Clarke Griffin, the protagonist of the book and TV series *The 100*, becomes the leader of a group of delinquents when they first set foot back on earth, after almost a hundred years of living in space. She uses the skills from her previous life in space to gain power over her own people and others. Roxy does something similar as she uses both her family name and her skills as a member of a gang to help Allie; within no time, she creates fake ID's, multiple fake bank accounts, and a way for Allie to get out of the country should this be necessary. Due to her exceptionally strong power and her skills, she becomes Allie's right hand, but eventually makes a name for herself. Not only are Allie, Roxy, Tunde and Jocelyn of the right age to appeal to an audience that has been reading young adult literature over the past decade, but their storylines also partly follow narrative structures very similar to those found in young adult literature. Young adult literature has provided some of the biggest sales in bookstores over the past years. *The Hunger Games* took the eleventh place in the top 100 best sold books in the Netherlands in 2012, and its successors *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay* took respectively the twentieth and twenty-second place (CPNB). This is quite impressive for a trilogy that appeals only to a small part of the Dutch population; to compare, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy took the first three places in the top 100. Although *The Power* is not marketed as young adult literature but more often is classified as science fiction or literary fiction in bookstores, the fact that the book also appeals to a younger audience certainly does help sales figures.

The Power is a book that has taken a lot of inspiration from religion: not only did Naomi Alderman denounce her religion after her previous book, but she has also stated that she is very interested in the role of religious figures in a story like this (Armitstead). The narration in *The Power* is by an omniscient narrator, but takes the focalization and

perspective of many other characters. Some of these protagonists are not only young, but follow story-lines very similar to those often portrayed in young adult literature; which leads to the assumption that *The Power* certainly is also suitable for an audience that has been growing up reading young adult literature. This is important because Alderman's book provides both a very clear image of how women are still oppressed today by turning our society around, and makes a very clear statement about gender and the way we perceive gender. Because her book is applicable to a more diverse, but also to a younger audience, she helps to spread this message to groups that previously had perhaps not been as attentive of these issues. It is very important to note here that her book has become a bestseller. This is at least partly because the novel won the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction in 2017. Literary prizes are unique in the fact that they are "the single best instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital" (English 10). Literary prizes have a large effect on the validation and status of a book, and can therefore help turn a work into a bestseller (Bourdieu 51). The Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction award for *The Power* has therefore further helped to create a large audience for this work.

Chapter Three: *Red Clocks*

Although *Red Clocks* has received far less attention in media and bookstores than *The Power* or even *The Handmaid's Tale*, it certainly is worthwhile to discuss this novel in this thesis. The back of the English edition of *Red Clocks* by HarperCollins Publishers reads:

With the verve of Naomi Alderman's *The Power* and the prescient brilliance of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Leni Zumas' incredible second novel *Red Clocks* is riveting, magnetic and frighteningly plausible.

The review for *Red Clocks* in *The New York Times* was, not coincidentally, written by Naomi Alderman; which is additional buttressing evidence that this novel definitely should be discussed in this thesis. *Red Clocks* was released in January 2018 and is therefore the most recent example discussed in this thesis. The novel poses a dystopian imagination of the United States in the relatively near future. Society is still more or less the same, with the exception of a few new laws, all concerning women. Abortion is now forbidden and legally considered murder. A new law, "Every Child Needs Two", is about to come into effect at the start of the novel. This law forbids single parents from having children as kids should by law have two parents. The text consists of the stories of four women, directly influenced by the new laws: The Mender, The Biographer, The Wife and The Daughter. They do not all get names in the narrative, but as the story progresses, we learn more about each protagonist through their interactions with the others. The Daughter, Mattie, is a smart high school student who gets pregnant. She attempts abortion in Canada, but is not able to cross the border. Instead, she asks her teacher Ro for help. Ro, or The Biographer, is desperately trying to get pregnant through artificial insemination before the new law passes. She works on a book about a female polar explorer from 1851, of which segments intercept the narrative. Ro

is friends with Susan, The Wife; she is jealous of Susan's perfect life. Susan seems to have it all: a husband, a job and two children. Yet in her chapters we learn that she is not as happy as others expect her to be as she tries to talk to her husband about a divorce and imagines driving her car, with the children in the backseat, down a cliff.

Ro, who spends incredible amounts of money on treatments to get her pregnant, eventually turns to Gin, The Mender. Gin, who has created a living outside of society, with her own farm and animals, uses her knowledge of herbs to provide homeopathic solutions to the women who visit her. She is arrested because she is suspected of having assisted in abortion, and her trial brings all the women in the book together.

Gin's trial is not only one of the core elements that unites the women in the book; it also serves as the climax. She is accused of having assisted a woman in terminating her pregnancy as her fingerprints are all over a bottle containing herbs and the other ingredients needed for an abortion. She denies her guilt, stating that the woman had never even been pregnant, but she is painted as a witch by the prosecutor and the jury, and this proves hard to turn around. "Mrs. Costello believes Gin Percival cursed the waters, charmed the tides, and brought the seaweed back. Half of these jurors may think the same. And if a witch can charm the tides, what else is she capable of?" (Zumas 252). Her lifestyle further influences this image: she lives alone, in the woods, with a cat, providing herbal treatments for illnesses and other ailments. The inspiration behind this was, unlike the similar witch trials in *The Handmaid's Tale*, not necessarily inspired by religious history. Leni Zumas has said that she has been more attentive to the dystopian resonances of right-wing fundamentalists than to those of religious fanatics (Zumas, "Dismantling"). This however does not take away from the fact that the paranoia against witches and the witch trials are historically a very Christian image. The comparisons between Gin and a witch are endless, and come even from Gin herself: "They aren't allowed to burn her, at least, though they can send her to a room for

ninety months.” (255). Yet the comparisons do not start with the trial. Very early on in the novel, Mattie refers to Gin as ‘the witch’: “The witch uses wild herbs that won’t incriminate you if you’re caught with them, cause the police can’t tell what they are” (100). It is later revealed that Mattie, who was adopted, is the biological daughter of Gin, although Mattie never finds out. It is hardly a coincidence that the Mender’s biological daughter was born in Salem.

This relationship is one of the many that exist between the four characters. All characters are connected to one another in multiple ways. Mattie is the biological daughter of Gin, she babysits Susan’s children occasionally and is taught by Ro. Ro is friends with Susan, having known her from when Susan still worked, before she quit her job and became a full-time mother. Ro, like Mattie, visits Gin for help: Ro because she wants to become pregnant, Mattie because she wants to end her pregnancy. Susan used to be in the same class with Bryan, who is called to testify in Gin’s trials. These multiple connections between characters are not laid out immediately. They are spread throughout the text, and can only be understood by reading all narratives. As the characters do not provide their own names in their chapters, it takes a little while to understand who is who. One could argue that this under emphasis on names, and providing little information as to what the characters look like, ensures that their stories can be applied to multiple women, giving an overview of what could happen to anyone, rather than individual stories of what happened.

The title of each chapter is simply the title that belongs to the protagonist featuring in that chapter. The protagonists focalize the chapter, but they do not narrate their own chapters. For example, the fragment from one of the chapters about Susan, where she finally tells her husband that she wants to separate:

He stamps out the cigarette on the gravel path. “You know what I won’t miss?”

Me.

“Your shitty cooking.”

“And I won’t miss having three children,” says the wife.

“Fuck you, Susan.”

The wife kneels on the path.

Rent a car. Open a bank account. Bring yourself to care. (Zumas 326)

The focalization in this fragment is Susan’s. When Didier asks her what he won’t miss, her initial response is that he will not miss her; these are Susan’s thoughts. The list at the end, of things she has to do, is very typical for Susan’s chapters as they recur constantly. However, they do not appear in any of the other chapters. The lists are Susan’s, who is mentally continuously running check-lists. The narration, on the other hand, is not Susan’s. Although the “me” is in first person, the rest of the text is not. The narrator does not mention the name Susan, always referring to the wife, without the capitalisation that appears at the head of every chapter. This is the same for each chapter; although the style of the narration is different, all women focalize their own chapters, but do not narrate them.

It is interesting that Ro’s title, biographer, originates from her manuscript. In a way, all other titles are taken from what society regards them to be, to some extent. Mattie as the daughter refers both to her struggles with terminating her pregnancy rather than giving the child up for adoption, like her own mother did. It also links her as the biological daughter of the mender. The mender’s title is perhaps unusual, and not what most would call the character, as she is mostly called the witch, but it certainly is what the other characters in the book regard her as. The wife’s title most definitely directly refers to her role in society; she is supposed to be a perfect, caring wife and a loving mother, but she does not find any of these qualities in herself, and struggles with that. The biographer’s title however refers to the fact

that she is the author of the story about the polar explorer, something that she rarely talks about with others. Zumas provides an explanation for this: “I wanted to call attention to the inadequacy of labels. All of us have multiple identities, yet we can find ourselves reduced to a single one” (Zumas, *Electric Literature*). They are continuously judged by one another; Ro is jealous of Susan because of her seemingly perfect life, but in Susan’s chapter one learns that she is far from living a perfect life. Susan, in turn, does not understand Ro’s dire wish to have children, and judges her accordingly. The roles that these women are given are continuously challenged, both in their own chapters and in others’ chapters.

In many ways, the fragments of Ro’s manuscript about the polar explorer Eivør are different from the other chapters. They are not focalized through Eivør as she is a historical figure who lived in 1841: the feelings and thoughts described are Ro’s creation. The manuscript is fragmented, as the reader only gets short pieces that intercept after every chapter. The fragments vary in length, from multiple paragraphs to two lines. It is the only narrative that is told both in first person and in third person. “Amongst the different names for polar ice, the name I like best is ‘pack’” (Zumas 157), or “When the polar explorer turned six, she was shown the best way to hold a knife” (Zumas 57). The narrative of Eivør is the only one that mentions her own name: the narration alternates between referring to ‘the polar explorer’ and ‘Eivør’.

Eivør’s story is a biography; containing parts narrated when she was six, nineteen, and older. The other narratives however take up less time: approximately four months. Mattie is eight weeks late to her period in her first chapter, and terminates her pregnancy at approximately twenty-one weeks. The stories of the other women run in tandem to hers, so they have the same timeline.

Mattie is, at fifteen years old, the youngest in the text. The other characters are older; Susan is the mother of two young children, and Ro seems to have a similar age. Although all

these characters are intertwined, it is significant that one of them is quite young as opposed to the rest. As argued in the previous chapter, adding a younger character appeals to a younger audience. Mattie's character, although dealing with very serious problems, also wonders about how to keep a secret from her parents, and wishes that she could confide in them her secrets. Such elements in her narrative make her a relatable character for a younger audience; ensuring that *Red Clocks* is a book both suitable for a younger and an older audience. This, however, is not something that major reviewers of the book have picked up on.

Red Clocks is particularly interesting in terms of the narrative. The multiple perspectives that all have a similar structure, but rather different contents, have many functions. They serve to provide more depth and characteristics to the women, that are otherwise not given. It is through these multiple perspectives that one learns the names of all these characters; as they are not provided within their own chapters. The multiple perspectives also provide depth to both the titles of the four women, and help shape our understanding of them. Religion plays less of a role in this work; although the witch trials are certainly based on Christian imagery, Leni Zumas has said that this was not her direct inspiration.

However, through the character of the mender, Gin Percival, the element of witches and the persecution of witches, appears quite strongly in the novel. She is seen as a witch by society, and is ultimately charged as such when she is put on trial for having helped with an abortion. Although the novel has no direct ties to religion, the many references to the persecution of witches are a religious theme. Lastly, the novel features one young character, that helps to create a larger audience for this book. Her book is, in light of the continuous fight to legalize abortion everywhere, very relevant in our society.

Chapter Four: Comparison

The chapters above have provided an analysis for each book. This chapter will serve as an in-depth comparison between all three books, on grounds of religion, narration and young adult elements. I have chosen to base my analysis on these three characteristics for multiple reasons. Religion has turned out to be an important element in all three novels. This is not necessarily a characteristic of dystopian novels, but it is perhaps not surprising that it features heavily in all of these novels. After all, all ideas about constricting women's rights are often ideas that are imbedded in conservative religion. The idea that abortion is murder, as imagined in *Red Clocks* but also very apparent in modern discussions about abortion laws, is based on the idea that all life is sacred; a religious notion. As Atwood writes, about the puritan notions that underline her novel: "The Republic of Gilead is built on a foundation of the 17th-century Puritan roots that have always lain beneath the modern-day America we thought we knew" (Atwood, "Age of Trump"). This is not to say that it is solely a religious idea, but rather that it is based on religious ideas. As religion has been a source of inspiration for, or is featured in all three novels, this has proven to be an important element to compare and analyse for this thesis.

Much like the idea that abortion is murder, the ideas behind witches and witch trials originate from religion. They appear both in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Red Clocks*. In the theological republic of Gilead, executions of criminals are big public events, that Handmaids are forced to attend. Although the one trial that Offred attends is that of a man who has been accused of raping Handmaids, which shows that such executions are not limited to women as witch trials were, they are very similar to witch trials. Atwood has stated multiple times that one of her three main inspirations was 17th-century Puritanism, and the witch craft trials that

they performed. In an interview with *The New York Times* in 1986, right after the book was published, she states that:

I started noticing that a lot of the things I thought I was more or less making up were now happening, and indeed more of them have happened since the publication of the book. There is a sect now, a Catholic charismatic spinoff sect, which calls the women handmaids. They don't go in for polygamy of this kind but they do threaten the handmaids according to the biblical verse I use in the book – sit down and shut up.
(Rothstein)

The oppression of women in itself is therefore a very religious element in *The Handmaid's Tale*; and similarly, in *Red Clocks* and *The Power*. The grander theme of oppressing women and more specifically, the witch trials that appear in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in *Red Clocks*, can therefore not be seen without their religious context.

The connection to the religious and historical practice of witch trials is even more directly visible in *Red Clocks*. Gin Percival, one of five protagonists in the novel, is not only seen as a witch by most of society, but is also judged as such. When she is accused of having helped another woman with her abortion, her lawyer directly tells her that defending herself will be more difficult as the prosecutor already believes Gin to be a witch.

This predicament is not new. The mender is one of many. They aren't allowed to burn her, at least, though they can send her to a room for ninety months. Officials of the Spanish Inquisition roasted them alive. (Zumas 255)

Zumas directly draws a line between the historical practices of the persecution of witches and the treatment of Gin Percival many centuries later, in what is perceived to be the United States in the near future. Not only through directly mentioning the historical burning of witches, but also because the town the book is set in, is called Salem. It is not a coincidence that the town is named after the location of the most infamous location of witch trials. There is a recipe for 'witch cake' in one of Gin Percival's old family books, where the entry dates from 1692, written in Salem, Massachusetts (Zumas 95). There is thus quite a direct link between the historical witch trials and both *Red Clocks* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Although *The Power* does not have such historical religious references, religion is a very important element in this novel. Much like Margaret Atwood, Naomi Alderman has been directly inspired by religion. Whereas Atwood's family was part of the witch trials, Alderman's connection is more recent. She was brought up Jewish, but wrote herself out of it in her second book *Disobedience* (2006), as it made her realize that there were elements that she did not agree with. This shows that religion has definitely been a major source of inspiration for Alderman's writing before, and it is easy to assume that it has been too for this book. One of the four protagonists of *The Power* is Allie, who adopts the persona of Mother Eve and starts a new religion. She starts this in the convent where she ends up fleeing to. Interestingly enough, the convent was a suggestion by Margaret Atwood herself. The nuns in the convent initially tell the girls how to behave, lay down rules, forbid them of using their power; but eventually Allie takes over as all girls in the convent start following her. The convent is in many ways similar to the Rehabilitation centres in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the Aunts teach the Handmaids how to act, what to do and what not to do, and Atwood's influence on *The Power* is very visible here.

Narration is of course an important element of each book as each book has a narrator, albeit in different styles. Striking here is that there is a major difference between Atwood's

classic example and the two recent examples by Alderman and Zumas. The narrator in *The Handmaid's Tale* is, as analysed in a previous chapter, an unreliable, homo-diegetic, constructed narrator. The book only provides the perspective of Offred, who is looking back on past events. Her narrative however is also very obviously constructed, something that she refers to herself multiple times. The only other perspective that the reader gets on the story of Gilead is the discussion at the symposium in the epilogue of the text. At the symposium, academics discuss whether Offred was a real person and whether her story was entirely truthful. This both encourages the reader to regard Offred as a narrator critically, but also provides proof that the events Offred describes, to some extent, have definitely happened.

Yet both *The Power* and *Red Clocks* consist of multiple perspectives, which are not narrated by the character that provides the focalization for these chapters. *The Power* is narrated by a single omniscient narrator. It remains unclear who narrates the chapters of *Red Clocks*; it could be a single omniscient narrator for the entire book, or different omniscient narrators for each chapter. Interestingly enough, both books have separate perspectives, yet a different narrator. The multiple perspectives provide a broader view on events; which therefore ensures that the books are relatable for a bigger audience than *The Handmaid's Tale* is. *The Power* includes a male perspective amongst all female perspectives, and *Red Clocks* gives both the view of a woman who desperately wants a child but is unable to get one, and a woman who perhaps would rather not have children, even though she has two. Both books therefore provide a more diverse overview of the subjects that they discuss.

Interesting to note is that all books provide an extra element to their narrative. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the symposium at the epilogue of the book provides the reader with a more positive ending; after all, Gilead has fallen. It also serves as historical proof within the narrative, that the events Offred describes are real. Something similar happens in *The Power*; on the one hand, the narrative is framed by the letters between Naomi and Neil, set in a world

where women very clearly hold the dominant position. But the narrative of Allie, Roxy and the others is occasionally interrupted by historical proof for the skeins. There is rock art depicted, that shows a ritual where male genital mutilation through the power is shown (Alderman 248) or a sketch of a mass grave with male skeletons only (Alderman 162). These are further historical proof for what happens in the narrative.

Although *Red Clocks* relies less on a need to prove the narrative, the story of the four women is interrupted after every chapter with a short fragment about the polar explorer. These can be fragments from the manuscript, that appear in different narrative styles, or emails about the manuscript, addressed to the biographer. The story of the polar explorer gives a historical perspective as it shows that women have been oppressed for centuries; and therefore links it with the stories of the other four women. All three books therefore use a form of historical proof to further enhance or put emphasis on the narrative.

Interesting is that because both *The Power* and *Red Clocks* provide multiple perspectives, they also provide a younger perspective than that usually seen in dystopian or literary novels. Young adult dystopian literature has increased in popularity to the point that *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collin's famous series, has surpassed the sale figures of the *Harry Potter* series (Ames 6). At the same time, literary criticism has been anything but positive about the surge of young adult literature, often arguing that such works are not literary and that they corrupt the people that read them (Crowe 146). This provides a dual position for dystopian works now. On the one hand, young adult fiction sells: the amount of blockbuster adaptations that have come from young adult books say enough on this matter. On the other hand young adult does not have a very good reputation within literary circles. What results is, for *Red Clocks* and *The Power* at least, two books that do draw on the strengths of young adult, but are not necessarily marketed as such. Chris Crowe points out that the label 'young adult' is mostly a marketing technique (147), something which does not

apply to either of these books. Yet they do both use narratological elements that originate in young adult literature, as well as characters that have the right age for young adult readers. Three out of four main protagonists in *The Power* are relatively young at the start of the novel, and the narrative is therefore also largely about how they grow up, become comfortable with their own abilities and grow into the roles that they take up during the book. Allie refines her skill so she can perform miracles and grows into Mother Eve. Roxy first acts as Allie's right hand, but realizes that she feels more at home in the criminal world she grew up in, and becomes the world biggest drug dealer with a new drug that only works for women. Tunde first becomes a fearless journalist, who thinks that he is giving women a voice; but when his own life gets threatened, he starts documenting the changes in the world rather than the changes for women. This coming-of-age element is very characteristic for young adult literature.

Science fictional elements are also often found in young adult texts. The popular young adult dystopian novel *The 100* by Kass Morgan (2013) is a dystopia set on Earth, but only after mankind has been forced to live and survive in space after a nuclear war. This is merely a means to tell a story about the situation on earth, after mankind comes back to Earth. Similarly, the electrical power that is the main driving force behind the plot of *The Power* is a means to tell a story about gender and oppression.

Although there are fewer narrative elements that are so characteristic of young adult literature in *Red Clocks*, nonetheless one out of four protagonists falls into the young adult timeline. Mattie is fifteen at the start of the novel, and her story is mainly about how the abortion laws have affected her as a teenager. Her chapters are also often about Yasmine, her best friend who was imprisoned after she attempted an abortion by throwing herself down the stairs. Mattie often describes how her friend would have handled certain things, or how they used to be together. Her narrative therefore is as much about a teenager missing her best

friend as anything else. Yet she worries more about whether she can compete in a mathematics competition because of her pregnancy than about the risk she is taking when she attempts to go to Canada for an abortion. She also provides an interesting perspective as she herself had been put up for adoption after her birth; she wonders about her biological mother, but also what would have happened if her biological mother had aborted her, like she is about to do with her own baby.

All of this ensures that although the books are not marketed and sold as young adult, they are applicable to young adult readers and thus are relatable to a larger audience than they would have been without these perspectives.

This analysis has thus provided multiple insights on these two modern books. Firstly, religion is an important element in all of these books. This is very likely partly because religious ideas are at the very base of ideas and principles that oppress women and their rights; both in our own society and in these fictional counterparts. Secondly, it is very striking that whereas *The Handmaids' Tale* provides one perspective and is narrated by Offred, both *The Power* and *Red Clocks* provide multiple perspectives and an omniscient narrator. Some of these perspectives are from characters that fit the young adult age; while also taking some characteristics from young adult literature. This means that although they are not generally marketed as young adult books, they are applicable to a larger audience. This is not only beneficial in economic terms, as it makes it more likely that the book will become a success, but also in terms of raising awareness about the issues that these books portray. *The Power* is a pressing statement about the general oppression of women but also about how gender is perceived by our society. *Red Clocks* provides a look into a world where abortion is considered and charged as murder: a future which is, for some countries, perhaps all too likely to happen.

Conclusion

The analysis of the two books used to portray contemporary female-centred dystopian fiction in this thesis, Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks* and Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, are an attempt towards researching this subgenre. One can certainly draw a few conclusions when comparing these works to the very influential and canonical work such as *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, but it is not enough to say something about the state of this subgenre as a whole. However, this thesis has provided some points that can certainly be useful for further research.

Although this was not initially going to be part of my research, it has become very clear that Margaret Atwood still continues to be an inspiration for many writers, and that her writing has definitely become part of the canon. She and her books are found frequently in many different areas: in news articles about protests against abortion laws, as a marketing tool on the cover of *The Power*, or as a relatable point in reviews. Her influence is so big, that perhaps a connection to Atwood alone can be one of the characteristics of contemporary female-centred dystopian fiction.

It is also very striking that religion plays a big role in all of these books, albeit differently. In *Red Clocks* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, religion is one of the main reasons why, and how, things happen the way they do. Atwood's Gilead is a theological republic, where Christianity is a state religion and many of the practices of Gilead have been based directly on historical examples. *Red Clocks* provides a more modern take on age-old religious practices such as the persecution of witches and directly links the events in the book to history through referencing to the Spanish Inquisition or the town of Salem.

Religion plays a different role in *The Power*, where one of the main protagonists single-handedly uses her new-found power to become Mother Eve, face of the new religion

in light of recent changes in the world. She adapts this role while she is in the convent, a suggestion by Atwood, and thus, religion plays an important role in the creation of the new world before and after the Cataclysm.

Narration is very important for all books, not merely the three that are discussed here. Two conclusions can be drawn here. On the one hand, all three books have embedded a form of ‘historical proof’ within their narrative. *The Handmaid’s Tale* ends with an epilogue about a symposium held after Gilead has fallen, which discusses Offred’s story and Gilead itself. The epilogue serves a double meaning. It is both a positive note on which the book ends, as it shows that Gilead has fallen, and serves to further validate the events in the book: they certainly are possible, even if there is always hope again for a better world. The narrative of the four protagonists in *Red Clocks* is continuously interrupted by fragments about the historical polar explorer Eivør. One of the protagonists, the biographer, is writing her story: which serves as a reminder that the oppression these women are going through, is not something of this century alone. Likewise, chapters in *The Power* are often interrupted by historical proof for the events in the story, such as historical drawings and sketches about the skeins before the events of *The Power*.

On the other hand there is a significant difference in the narration of *Red Clocks* and *The Power*, and the narration of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Although Offred is the unreliable and constructed homo-diegetic narrator, she does narrate her own story and is in this way fundamentally different from the two more modern examples. Yet she is also the only perspective provided in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and this is where the two modern examples are different. Both *The Power* and *Red Clocks* provide multiple perspectives; six and five respectively. The narration in each chapter is focalized by the character who is the subject of said chapter, but they do not narrate their own chapters. *The Power* is very obviously narrated by one, omniscient narrator. It remains unclear whether *Red Clocks* is narrated by one or

multiple omniscient narrators. However, as characters often focalize but do not narrate their own chapters, since they do not even refer to themselves by their own names, it can be assumed that *Red Clocks* is also narrated by a single omniscient narrator.

Since both *The Power* and *Red Clocks* contain multiple perspectives in their narrative, they allow for more diverse perspectives than *The Handmaid's Tale*, which only uses Offred's perspective. *The Power*, for example, also provides two male perspectives on the story. Similarly, both books contain perspectives from younger characters. In *Red Clocks*, one of the main protagonists is the fifteen-year-old Mattie, the daughter, who provides the teen perspective on the abortion law as she does anything to abort her pregnancy, which would get in the way of her school results. *The Power* contains four young perspectives: Allie, Roxy, Tunde and Jocelyn all have the age that is represented in young adult literature. Their story is as much about growing up and learning to use their powers, learning to adapt to the new world, as it is about anything else. This is very characteristic of young adult literature.

All of these observations lead to two general conclusions about these works. Firstly, religion is a very important element in female-centred dystopian writing, as oppression of women and their rights have often had their origin in conservative religious thinking. It is therefore no surprise that religion continues to play an important role in works that deal with this subject matter.

Secondly it is very striking that both *The Power* and *Red Clocks* incorporate multiple, but also diverse perspectives. This is a conclusion based both on analysing the narratological elements of these books, and the similarities between these books and young adult literature. *Red Clocks* incorporates a historical perspective, a teen perspective, the perspective of a single woman who desperately wants a child, the perspective of a mother who wonders if she would have been happier if abortion had been an option, and the perspective of a woman

whose life is indirectly influenced incredibly by the laws that *Red Clocks* explores. *The Power* provides a male perspective on how the situation changes and the power balance shifts and the perspective of a man who still attempts to take the dominant position by stealing a skein. It provides the perspective of a teen who is an outsider because her skein does not work like others', the perspective of a teen who single-handedly starts a new religion, the perspective of the daughter of a criminal who uses the new changes to her advantage, and that of a politician who quickly rises when she too, works the new situation to her advantage.

Both *The Power* and *Red Clocks* centre around providing multiple and diverse perspectives to one situation: this means that both books are applicable and relatable for a larger audience. The critical message, that is a part of every dystopian novel, and certainly a part of these novels too, is therefore also more easily spread to more people. This is an interesting conclusion in a time where, as events like Donald Trump's inauguration as president, the Women's March held as a response, but also the continuous battle against legalizing abortion, show that women's rights still need to be fought for. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has helped these protests in the sense as women have been dressing up as Handmaids during protests all over the world. The events of the past few years have again made clear that Margaret Atwood's canonical book is still very relevant today. Her book has motivated people to step up and voice their opinions, and this has been possible because her book and the message behind it reached a wide audience. Yet both *Red Clocks* and *The Power* have been written in such a way, that their stories are relatable for an even bigger audience than *The Handmaid's Tale*. Therefore, this conclusion has the most social relevance. By engaging with characters that are all very diverse, Naomi Alderman and Leni Zumas ensure that their book is readable, as well as relatable for a large audience. Their message has the potential to reach a far more diverse audience than *The Handmaid's Tale* has. Instead of providing the perspective of one white woman, they have created novels that

are relatable for a far larger number of people. In this sense, it is especially *The Power* that has had an incredible role, as it has become a bestselling novel and acquired much symbolic capital through winning the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction. Perhaps, in a few years, it will be *The Power* or *Red Clocks* that are referenced at protests about women's rights, and will these works become as influential and canonical as *The Handmaid's Tale* is now.

Works Cited

- “A Moment with Margaret Atwood.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Indigo|Chapters, 24 Apr. 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=317&v=S0z8Jw17CV0.
- Alderman, Naomi. *The Power*. Penguin Books, 2017.
- Ames, Melissa. “Engaging ‘Apolitical’ Adolescents: Analyzing the Popularity and Educational Potential of Dystopian Literature Post-9/11.” *The High School Journal*, vol. 97, no.1, 2013, pp. 3-20. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43281204?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
- Armitstead, Claire. “Interview. Naomi Alderman: ‘I went into the novel religious and by the end I wasn’t. I wrote myself out of it’”. *The Guardian*, 28 Oct. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/28/naomi-alderman-interview-the-power>.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Vintage Books, 2010.
- . “Margaret Atwood on What *The Handmaid’s Tale* Means in the Age of Trump.” *The New York Times*, 10 Mar. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-age-of-trump.html>.
- . “*The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* ‘in context’”. *PMLA*, vol. 119, no.3, 2004.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. “The forms of capital.” *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*. Edited by Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 81-94.
- Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1998, pp. 519-531. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

- Calvacanti, Ildney. "The Writing of Utopia and the Feminist Critical Dystopia: Suzy McKee Charnas's Holdfast series." *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, edited by Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, Routledge, 2003, pp. 47-68.
- Casasanto, Daniel. "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Whorf? Crosslinguistic Differences in Temporal Language and Thought." *Language Learning*, vol 58, no.1, 2008, pp. 63-79. *Online Library*, <https://onlinelibrary-wileycom.proxy.library.uu.nl/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2008.00462.x>.
- Charles, Ron. "*The Power* is our era's *Handmaid's Tale*". *The Washington Post*, 30 Oct. 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-power-is-our-eras-handmaids-tale/2017/10/10/032a5866-ad05-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98_story.html?utm_term=.c28631938254.
- Claeys, Gregory. "The origins of dystopia." *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by Gregory Claeys. Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 107-135.
- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic, 2010.
- CPNB. "CPNB Top 100 2012". *CPNB.nl*, Jan, 2013, https://www.cpnb.nl/sites/default/files/cpnb_users/m.hemels/CPNB_Top100_2012.pdf.
- Crowe, Chris. "Young Adult Literature: The Problem with YA Literature." *The English Journal*, vol. 90, no. 3, 2001, pp. 146-150, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/821338>.
- English, James. "Introduction: Prizes and The Study of Culture". *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Harvard UP, 2010.
- Fitting, Peter. "A Short History of Utopian Studies." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol 36, no. 1, 2009, pp. 121-131. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25475211>.

- Garschagen, Melle. "Wordt abortus nu ook in Noord-Ierland legaal?" *NRC*, 5 Jun. 2018, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2018/06/05/wordt-abortus-nu-ook-in-noord-ierland-legaal-a1605552>.
- Hauser, Christine. "A Handmaid's Tale of Protest." *The New York Times*, 30 Jun. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/us/handmaids-protests-abortion.html>.
- Hintz, Carrie. "Monica Hughes, Lois Lowry, and Young Adult Dystopias." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2002, pp. 254-264. *Project Muse*, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/35550>.
- "How Margaret Atwood's Puritan ancestors inspired *The Handmaid's Tale*." *CBC Radio*, 8 Jun. 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/religion-utopia-or-dystopia-1.4143654/how-margaret-atwood-s-puritan-ancestors-inspired-the-handmaid-s-tale-1.4143718>.
- "Is the Swedish Deputy PM Trolling Trump With this All-female Photo?" *The Guardian*, 4 Feb. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/feb/03/sweden-criticises-us-climate-stance-as-it-reveals-ambitious-carbon-emissions-law>.
- Krishna, Swapna. "Naomi Alderman on her electrifying work of feminist sci-fi, *The Power*." *Los Angeles Times*, 27 Oct. 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-alderman-power-20171027-htmllstory.html>.
- Morgan, Kass. *The 100*. Little, Brown and Company, 2014.
- Neuman, S.C. "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism and *The Handmaid's Tale*." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2006, pp. 857-868. *Project Muse*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/200541>.

Rothenburg, Jason, developer. *The 100*. CBS Television Studios and Warner Bros.

Television, 2014.

Rothstein, Mervyn. "No Balm in Gilead for Margaret Atwood." *The New York Times*, 17 Feb.

1986. *The New York Times Archive*, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/03/specials/atwoodgilead.html?scp=8&sq=%252522the%252520handmaid%252527s%252520tale%252522&st=cse>.

Stein, Karen F. "Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Canadian Literature*, vol.148, 1996, pp 57-72.

Vevaina, Coomi S. "Margaret Atwood and history." *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by Coral Ann Howells. Cambridge UP, 2006, pp. 86-99.

Vieira, Fátima. "The concept of utopia". *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by Gregory Claeys. Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 3-28.

Women's March. "About". *Website*. www.womensmarch.com/mission.

Zumas, Leni. "On Dismantling the Power of White Antifeminist America." *Electric Literature*, <https://electricliterature.com/on-dismantling-the-power-of-white-antifeminist-america-27e8d008f1be>.

---. *Red Clocks*. Borough Press, 2018.