

The entrapment of  
women in atwood:  
"the year of the flood"  
and "the heart goes  
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Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* and *The Year of the Flood* are cautionary, post-apocalyptic novels that tell two different stories with many similarities. *The Heart Goes Last* follows Stan and Charmaine, a married couple struggling to stay afloat in the midst of an economic and social collapse. Job loss forces them to live in their car as they desperately try to maintain a life worth living. The Positron Project in the town of Consilience seems to be the answer to their prayers; inside, no one is unemployed and everyone lives comfortably for six months out of the year. Every other month, residents must leave their homes and become inmates in the Positron prison. The Positron Project seems like a dream come true for Stan and Charmaine until Charmaine becomes romantically involved with the alternate that lives in their house when they are in prison. This romantic affair sets off a chain reaction which leads Stan and Charmaine to unearthing the true intentions of the Positron Project and its leader, Ed. *The Year of the Flood* is the second novel in the Maddaddam Trilogy. It focuses on a religious sect called the God's Gardeners, which is a small vegetarian community of survivors of the waterless flood that destroyed most of mankind. The novel follows two main female characters: Toby and Ren, whose stories intertwine with each other. Toby is a young woman who loses her parents under tragic circumstances, and is forced to live off the grid in a shady burger restaurant. She soon encounters the attention of Blanco - the psychopathic manager of the chain who sexually assaults his female employees and has a reputation of killing women. The leader of the God's Gardeners, Adam One, rescues Toby from Blanco and takes her in to live with him and the Gardeners. Toby becomes an influential member of the gardeners and encounters Ren, a child member of the gardeners. Ren eventually grows up to become a prostitute

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and trapeze dancer in the sex-club Scales and Tails, and happens to be locked in a biocontainment unit in the club when the pandemic occurs. Similarly, Toby is barricaded within a luxury spa where she has begun to work following a raid on the gardeners by Blanco and his brutish friends. Even these brief synopses of the novel's plots reveal that there is a deep similarity on the level of characterization: both of Atwood's novels contain strong female characters who become trapped by their surroundings.

A common motif among both *The Heart Goes Last* and *The Year of the Flood* is the entrapment of women by the people and the world around them. The societies in which they live in put female characters such as Ren, Toby, Veronica, and Charmaine in positions where they have limited choices. All four women are stuck in their surroundings by physical, financial, and sexual means. The most obvious way the characters are stuck is physically in their environment. After the Waterless Flood, both Ren and Toby are trapped in their surroundings: Ren in the Sticky Zone, and Toby in the Anooyoo Spa. Ren describes her feelings about the Sticky Zone as, " I am lucky. I am really very lucky. Count your luck, Amanda used to say. So I do. First, I was lucky to be working here at Scales when the Flood hit. Second, it was even luckier that I was shut up this way in the Sticky Zone, because it kept me safe," (*The Year of the Flood* 6). Although Ren considers her entrapment to be lucky, the physical entrapment of these characters is symbolic of a larger entrapment of women during the time of the Flood. Similarly, Charmaine's story begins with her entrapment with Stan in their car. The horrific conditions of the couple's living arrangements are described as, " With the windows shut except for a crack at the top, the air gets dead and supersaturated with their

own smells. There aren't many places where they can grab a shower or wash their clothes, and that makes Stan irritable. It makes Charmaine irritable too," (The Heart Goes Last 3). Once inside Consilience, she becomes trapped once more by the contract binding them to their agreement to live inside the Positron Project. Furthermore, every other month, Charmaine is trapped inside the Positron Prison, where she loses even more of her freedom and right to choose. The physical entrapment of these characters is a preface to the mental and emotional entrapment that they will come to face later on in their stories. The idea that the female characters are stuck in their surroundings is made more prominent due to the fact that it is the actions of men that have caused their entrapment. Ren and Toby are stuck in their surroundings because of the work of Crake, an evil scientist whose goal is to destroy the human race in order to create a new humankind. Charmaine's entrapment is partially the fault of her husband Stan and other part the fault of Ed, the leader of Consilience. The fact that these women are stuck because of men further emphasizes their lack of power in society.

Similar to the idea that men have physically trapped the female characters, Atwood shows men trapping women financially as well. The most prominent example of a woman who is financially stuck is seen in *The Heart Goes Last*. Charmaine is trapped in a financial aspect throughout a majority of the novel by various male characters. Her husband Stan is the biggest cause of her financial entrapment. Because of his inability to hold a job, and his quick discouragement while looking for a new one, Charmaine is forced to provide for the two of them by working at a bar called PixelDust. This job is demeaning for Charmaine and does not pay well. Atwood describes

Charmaine's job at PixelDust saying, " The evening would be better for tips, but Stan says he doesn't want her working then because there are too many drunken leechers, though he may have to give in on that if she's offered the slot, because their cash stash is getting really small," (The Heart Goes Last 17). This quote shows the demeaning conditions that Charmaine is forced to work in and, even though Stan has every intention of protecting her, she has to work with disgusting and dangerous customers in order to maintain their wellbeing. Due to their low income, the couple is forced to live out of their car, paycheck to paycheck. Charmaine is financially bound to Stan and to her job at PixelDust because it is their only means of survival. Out of desperation, Charmaine and Stan sign up for the Positron Project and move to Consilience. At this point, the couple is no longer financially trapped by each other, but by the leader of the Positron Project, Ed. Their contractual agreement which was signed when they first entered Consilience, entrapped the couple within the bounds of Ed and the Project. Although they would not have survived outside of the Project, the financial entrapment takes a toll on Charmaine, as she, once again, finds herself financially trapped by a man. Similarly, in *The Year of the Flood*, Toby finds herself financially trapped by Blanco, the manager of the SecretBurger chain. After the death of her father, Toby has no identity and cannot find a stable job. She cycles through a series of degrading jobs before finding what seems to be a safe and stable source of money: a position at a restaurant called SecretBurger. Atwood writes, " Toby was pleased to learn she'd gotten the SecretBurgers job: she could pay rent, she wouldn't starve. But then she discovered the catch. The catch was the manager," (The Year of the Flood 35). She quickly learns that the manager is notorious for raping and ultimately killing his female employees.

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Out of desperation, Toby stays at her job at SecretBurger, even after one of her coworkers is killed by Blanco. Because of her desperate financial situation, Toby allows Blanco to trap her at SecretBurger until she is rescued by the God's Gardeners.

The most prominent example of entrapment of female characters is in a sexual aspect. Almost every female character in both of Atwood's novels experiences sexual entrapment or is treated as a sexual object. For example, in *The Year of the Flood*, Ren and Toby are both victims of sexual entrapment. Before the Flood, Ren finds work as a trapeze dancer at a local sex joint called Scales and Tails. Here, she is looked at as a sexual object by every man who enters the bar. She dances for burly and frightening men who often are infected with many diseases, which is how she ended up in the Sticky Zone during the time of the flood. Similarly, Toby is the victim of sexual abuse at her job at SecretBurger. Blanco and his friends use her as a sex slave and she is bound to him and her job out of fear for her life. The men at the Scales and Tails club, along with Blanco and his friends, use their physical build and frightening reputations to sexually objectify and trap women. Along the same lines, in *The Heart Goes Last*, the reader is presented with countless examples of women who are being viewed as sexual objects and who are sexually trapped in their surroundings.

Charmaine is lusted after by Ed, whose behavior is nothing short of creepy. Ed commissions the Possibilibots company, a company that creates lifelike sex dolls, to create an exact replica of Charmaine as a sex robot.

Furthermore, Ed uses his power as the leader of Consilience to dominate Charmaine and coerce her into having a romantic relationship with him. Ed

planned to unwillingly modify Charmaine's brain so that she will fall desperately in love with him and become essentially his own sex slave. This procedure was done to Stan's guide, Veronica. A man payed to have Veronica altered; however, the outcome was not what he expected, as the first thing she saw was not the man, but a stuffed teddy bear. Veronica explains the situation saying, " I'm just plain frigid when it comes to real live men. The mere thought of them in that way makes me feel a little sick. That was programmed in when they did the operation," (The Heart Goes Last 209). This is an example of the sexual entrapment that female characters face in the novel. Time and time again, the reader is presented with examples of men who trap women sexually and treat women as sexual objects.

Female characters in both *The Heart Goes Last* and *The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood are constantly put in positions where they have limited choices because of their femininity. Atwood presents countless examples of the ways that women in her stories are trapped by their surroundings and by the men that they associate with. Female characters are rendered powerless and are trapped by physical, financial, and sexual means. The resolutions to these character's stories occur when they become unstuck, or freed from their entrapment. Through the use of religion, the female " Gaze", and sisterly relationships, female characters in Atwood's novels are able to free themselves from their entrapment by men. Religion plays a huge role in *The Year of the Flood* and its presence affects each individual character differently. For example, the introduction of the God's Gardeners into Toby's life empowered her and allowed her to escape from the hellish life that she

was living before. Out of desperation and fear, Toby continued to work at SecretBurger, even after Blanco took her as his sex slave. The sudden presence of the God's Gardeners in her life gave Toby the courage to escape from the SecretBurger store and from Blanco's control over her. Although still living in fear, Toby became part of the Gardeners and learned to accept their religion. The introduction of religion in her life allowed Toby to feel safe and welcomed for the first time. Atwood describes Toby's reaction when she first joins the Gardeners saying, " She found herself crying with relief and gratitude. It was as if a large, benevolent hand had reached down and picked her up, and was holding her safe," (The Year of the Flood 43). This quote emphasizes how her introduction to religion changed her and her outlook on her life. Gillian Alban, in her literary criticism entitled " Medusa as Female Eye or Icon in Atwood, Murdoch, Carter, and Plath", writes about the mythic Medusa archetype, which is used as a figure of female power in Atwood's writings. Medusa is a feared mythological figure with snakes for hair who, with just a look, turns her victims into stone. Alban writes about the power of the female " gaze" in reference to Medusa. Alban writes, " Annis Pratt refers to the Medusa effect as engulfment, or ' a frozen, stunned state of life fixed in stone that many poets associate with Medusa's creative inspiration as muse,'" (Alban 1). This quote describes the Gaze that gives Medusa her power and its tremendous impact on the people around her. This female " gaze" is utilized by various characters in Atwood's The Year of the Flood and The Heart Goes Last. For example, although she has no need to, Veronica could utilize the female Gaze and her good looks to get Stan to do anything she wanted. With one look, Stan was already infatuated by her. Stan describes meeting Veronica saying, " This is what he once thought Jasmine

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would look like.... He needs to watch it here, not let himself be hauled around by the gonads," (The Heart Goes Last 208). This quote shows the true power of the female Gaze over men.

In Hope Jennings' criticism, "The Comic Apocalypse of The Year of the Flood", she also writes about the Gaze, but in a different sense. She refers to the gaze as "the objectifying Gaze", inferring that female characters are being objectified by the male gazes that look their way. She also writes about a lack of the Gaze. In the case of Toby and Ren, for example, Jennings writes, "Ren and Toby, however, are left stranded or barricaded within locked spaces in which they are allowed no access to the other; s gaze, no means for situating themselves in relation to reality," (Jennings 15). Toby and Ren, with no outside contact, lose touch with reality while locked inside during the Flood. This loss of touch with reality, according to Jennings, occurred because of a lack of human "gaze" and human contact while inside the spa and the Sticky Zone. This, once again, proves the power of the female Gaze. Female relationships are another thing that is prominent throughout Atwood's novels. Often, the female characters form bonds with other female characters; these bonds are often significant to, and greatly affect, the outcomes of each character. Ren forms bonds with many of the female characters that surround her, including Bernice, Toby, and Amanda. Bernice is Ren's first friend in the God's Gardeners and, although they do not often get along, Ren and Bernice have a sisterly bond. Bernice keeps Ren out of constant trouble and the bond that they have is strong since they always disagree. Ren's bond with Bernice also allows her to create relationships with other characters, as her friendship with Bernice teaches her how to make

and keep friends. Ren and Bernice's strained relationship is what allows Ren to meet Amanda, out of an act of defiance towards Bernice. Bernice's reaction to Ren's actions is described saying, " Bernice came up to us red-faced. She always got red when she was mad. ' Come on, Ren,' she said. ' You're not supposed to talk to her,'" (The Year of the Flood 77). Ren's intentional defiance towards Bernice is what allows her to meet the most important person in her life. When Ren meets Amanda, a friendship is formed instantly and the two act as if they have known each other their whole lives.

Ren's relationship with Amanda is strong, unbreakable, and very important to Ren and her character development throughout the novel. Atwood describes Ren's love for Amanda in simple terms, saying, " Having Amanda living with me was like having a sister, only better," (The Year of the Flood 83). Ren's admiration for Amanda is what allows her to learn so much from her. Amanda teaches Ren things that she would not have been taught by the Gardeners, and Amanda is always there for Ren, even during the Flood when Ren is stuck in the Sticky Zone. Ren and Amanda keep in contact after they leave the Gardeners and it is Amanda who comes to Ren's aid when she cannot escape the Sticky Zone. Just as Amanda is there for Ren in her time of need, when Amanda is kidnapped by the Painballers, Ren does not rest until she is found. The relationship that Ren and Amanda formed proves to be stronger than any man and is ultimately what gets them unstuck when they are in sticky situations. Ren's relationship with Toby is at first reluctant. Toby is significantly older than Ren and Ren, like the other Gardener children, takes to making fun of her and her harsh personality. However,

after leaving the Gardeners, Ren and Toby meet again at the Anooyoo spa where they work together. Their relationship grows stronger and, ultimately, is what ends up saving Amanda and killing Blanco. Once the surviving Gardeners are reunited after the Flood, Toby and Ren set out to find Amanda. Their trust in one another is what allows Amanda to be saved.

Similarly, in *The Heart Goes Last*, Charmaine makes several female relationships with those around her in Consilience. Aurora and Jocelyn are two of the women who Charmaine is somewhat forced to become friends with. Aurora and Jocelyn unwillingly enter Charmaine's life after she is forced to kill her husband. Unbeknownst to Charmaine at the time, the two women will help save her life. However, their first meeting is unpleasant, to say the least. Atwood describes Charmaine's thoughts when she wakes up to find Aurora in her house, saying, "'Feeling better now?' She looks up from the sofa. Holy heck, it's Aurora from Human Resources.... Aurora is about the last person she wants to see, not only here and now but ever," (*The Heart Goes Last* 160). Although their relationship is forced, the bond that Charmaine forms with Aurora and Jocelyn is strong and powerful enough to ultimately save Charmaine from the leader of the Positron Project, Ed, whose goal is to alter Charmaine's brain to make her loyal to him. Aurora and Jocelyn, both members of the Surveillance team in Consilience, confide Ed's plan in Charmaine and offer a way to save her. The ultimate goal of Aurora and Jocelyn is to expose Consilience for the corrupt program that it is and have the entire project shut down. With Charmaine's help, they are able to do just that. The bond that is formed between the three women is what ends up saving Charmaine from Ed and exposing Ed as a corrupt business leader.

Their trust in one another and the relationship that they form also allows each of them to become unstuck from the financial and sexual entrapment that they were all facing.

The female characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* and *The Heart Goes Last* are all stuck in positions where they are powerless or have limited choices. They are trapped by physical, financial, and sexual means. Each character, including Ren, Toby, Charmaine, Veronica, Aurora, and Jocelyn faces entrapment by a man or a group of men, in the case of the Positron Project. Through collaboration with other women against the man, these characters were able to free themselves from their entrapment.

Atwood includes this prominent theme in her novels to make a stand about feminism and equality in today's society. Seeing as both novels are cautionary tales, Atwood includes this theme as a warning and a wake-up call to the real issues that women face in the world today, and she offers a solution that through the collaboration of women against the man, women will be able to free themselves of the society that entraps them.