

Sex-Bots Revisited: Bioethics and Parody in Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* (2015)

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1. Introduction

“Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse, for some.” (198), says the Commander in one of Atwood’s most well-known and celebrated novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The Commander’s warning serves as a powerful mantra that Atwood repeatedly embeds in her fiction, showing her readers how even seemingly utopian principles can harbour sinister motives. Furthermore, Atwood’s stories can be interpreted as cautionary tales against unquestioningly supporting a political or social system, because of its outward perfection. Such cautionary statement is also a testament to Atwood’s commitment to addressing the most pressing issues of our time, including climate change, gender politics, bioengineering or totalitarianism. Her keen understanding of current issues, such as technological advancements and bioengineering, is particularly pertinent in 2025, a year marked by the growing presence of artificial intelligence and genetic enhancements in our daily lives. However, scientific progress also presents challenges and moral ambiguities. For example, it is difficult to know where to draw the line between progress and interference with natural laws, which could have various unintended consequences that will eventually lead to difficult moral dilemmas and ethical debates. Through her relentless engagement with serious themes, Atwood invites her readers to see “the strong potential of fiction as a space for reflection that may question and transform reality” (Muñoz-González 189).

Time and again, Atwood returns to the same conundrum experienced by one of her characters from *The MaddAddam Trilogy*, Jimmy, who is trapped in a fictional world dominated by reckless technological advancements such as laboratory-grown artificial chicken meat named ChickieNobs: “Why is it he feels some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed? How much is too much, how far is too far?” (*Oryx and Crake* 242). Atwood’s fascination with ethical boundaries amidst rapidly evolving technologies raises awareness on the potential pitfalls of progress but also reflects on the various possibilities that these new scientific marvels open. In her dystopian fiction, more acutely in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, Atwood

fears that in our new age of genetic manipulation and biological control, we may be blindly entering a catastrophic posthuman future as our scientific mavens sit in judgment on the world and play God with the building blocks of life while we, like Jimmy-Snowman, remain unaware of the perils that surround us until things have gone too far for us to reverse humanity’s slippery-slope downward course (Bouson 107).

For instance, in 2019, Russian scientist Denis Rebrikov made a “controversial plan to create genetically engineered babies by altering the DNA in human embryos with CRISPR, the powerful genome editor” (Cohen), which sparked heated debates and widespread backlash. Atwood explored genetically modified organisms in her *MaddAddam Trilogy*, so her fiction has an anticipatory relevance in the sense that it tackles current issues that perplex scientists and ethicists alike. Another notable example of a dangerous contemporary innovation is Replica, a virtual companion which enables users to generate a digital avatar to act as their girlfriend or boyfriend. Up until 2023, Replica also had a module which allowed users to interact with the app using intimate roleplay. Other companies, like Joy Love Dolls, manufacture sexbots that can be customized and controlled by the user, which reflects “the dystopian potential of sexbots for mass-customised, corporate-controlled monetisation” (Ciriello).

To stress her commitment to grounding her stories in factual reality and to accentuate the gravity of the subject matter, Atwood clarifies that she writes speculative fiction, not science fiction (*In Other Worlds* 6). Indeed, the larger implication is that “the speculative scenarios function as a means to present the trajectory that science and technology in the contemporary world are already following” (Škrovan 46). Atwood’s interest in bioethics

and the potentially harmful consequences of rapidly advancing technologies places her alongside other writers who are concerned with the ethics of technologised bodies and posthuman futures. Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*, for instance, explores the ethics of cloning and human dignity in a posthuman environment where progress enables the extension of human life through organ donation. More recently, Jeanette Winterson wrote *Frankissstein* (2019), a deeply philosophical novel that deals with the posthuman future and the possibility of breaking free from the limitations of the human body. Also in 2019, Ian McEwan published *Machines Like Me*, an alternate history novel exploring the moral dilemmas associated with robots and the implications of smart androids living among humans. These writers are all concerned with fleshing out the possibilities that technology opens up, as well as the ethical implications of scientific progress.

Atwood is essentially an excellent "cultural analyst and imaginative novelist" (Howells 187) who offers her readers profound insight into topical matters through thought-provoking ideas, seamlessly blending "realism and fantasy, verbal artifice and serious moral engagement" (187). Her writing is rooted in sociocultural realities and articulates contemporary anxieties. Her stories are replete with parody and wordplays, which enhance the reading process, while also being effective tools for reflecting on scientific trends and social issues.

2. *The Positron Project: Social Experiment Gone Dark*

Atwood's diverse body of literary work addresses important current concerns such as gender inequality, technology, consumerism, or the climate crisis. *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), one of her latest dystopian novels, taps into current technological anxieties by creating an alternate American society devastated by economic collapse and dominated by vampiric corporations. Praised for being "a jarring, rewardingly strange piece of work" (Harrison 2015), *The Heart Goes Last* combines elements of fairy-tale, Gothic fiction, but also popular romance and "addresses a cluster of anxieties around threats to human rights, focusing on the abuses of corporate capitalism, our high-tech surveillance culture, and advances in biotechnology and robotics" (Howells 181). As such, the novel can be read as a cautionary tale that "warns about the potential disasters of late capitalist and consumerist societies by repositioning the American reality in a

dystopic setting and challenging vulnerable individuals' moral limits when faced with poverty and hunger" (Kosa, "Dystopic Reconfigurations" 256).

Set after "the big financial-crash business-wrecking meltdown that turned this part of the country into a rust bucket" (Atwood, *Heart* 6), the story centres on Charmaine and Stan, a couple living in extreme poverty, who are offered the possibility to live in an experimental compound, a town named Consilience, part of the Positron Project. The world is a hopeless and unsafe place for Charmaine and Stan, who find themselves in a position from which there is no hope of escape: "So what can he do? Where can they turn? There's no safe place, there are no instructions. It's like he's being blown by a vicious but mindless wind, aimlessly round and round in circles. No way out" (5). In these dire circumstances, the Positron Project seems like a beacon of hope. Their slogan, "A MEANINGFUL LIFE" (56) is designed to deceive unsuspecting individuals by emphasizing its messianic zeal. Atwood demonstrates to her readers how easily humans can be fooled by buzzwords and how important verbal framing is for customers.

The novel addresses consumer hypocrisy, the susceptibility of humans to clever marketing tactics, and the ease with which corporations commodify human emotions for financial gain. These themes are central to the novel. Stan, who used to work for a robotics company before the economic crash, explains how essential human emotions are for businesses looking to increase sales: "People didn't just want their groceries bagged, he used to explain Charmaine: they wanted a total shopping experience, and that included a smile. Smiles were hard; they could turn into grimaces or leers, but if you got a smile right, they'd spend extra for it" (7-8). Here, Atwood demonstrates how companies capitalize on human emotions and turn them into a source of profit. Additionally, this passage also anticipates the focus on human exploitation by corporations to the extent that the body becomes a site for medical experimentation and brainwashing. What's more, the passage hints at Atwood's creative use of Gothic elements in the novel. More specifically, the smile that can morph into a grimace or leer becomes a source of both dread and parody.

The whole social experiment, as some opponents describe it in the novel, "is an infringement of individual liberties, an attempt at total social control, an insult to the human spirit" (51), while concealed as a miraculous alternative to "looting and gang rule and warlords and mass rape, and the terrorization of the weak and helpless" (51). Utopian on the surface, but highly immoral at its core, the social project entails living alternate

lifestyles, namely spending one month in a house, then switching places with another couple and spending one month in prison. As Howells explains, “The Positron Project advertises itself as a utopian social experiment, but residents are constantly monitored in their alternative roles” (182), so the compound is, in fact, a terrifying site of entrapment and constant surveillance, where freedom is illusory. Hints about the dark secrets behind the project are scattered throughout the novel. For example, Stan remarks that how “Anything goes, out there in the so-called real world; though not inside Consilience” (318). This passage alludes to the strict social rules that govern the city, and to the established codes of behaviour that are reinforced there.

The Heart Goes Last illustrates how easily the truth can be distorted by clever marketing strategies. As the story develops, strange and grotesque details about the project resurface, which undermine its supposedly noble purpose. Essentially, “the greed-driven unscrupulous individuals behind the project seek to ensnare its participants from dire socioeconomic circumstances in a corporate-controlled social garrison” (Kosa, “Revisiting the Monster Tale” 138), which raises serious ethical questions. Atwood uses the Positron Project to test the limits of corporate greed and human endurance in the face of crisis. While her characters willingly join the project, the true intentions behind it remain secret and are only gradually revealed as the story unfolds. Here, Atwood makes an interesting point by giving her characters the freedom to choose their own path. The issue posited here aims to explore the extent to which humans are capable of morally degrading in desperate situations and how easily evil corporations can manipulate vulnerable individuals.

The Positron Project first appears to Charmaine and Stan as a paradisaical escape from their hellish reality. Charmaine observes how “everything is so spruced up, it’s like a picture. Like a town in a movie, a movie of years ago” (Atwood, *Heart* 42). Charmaine firmly believes in being pioneers for a new social model that has the potential to save entire nations and create a prosperous future for all: “They’re like the early pioneers, blazing a trail, clearing a way to the future: a future that will be more secure, more prosperous, and just all-round better because of them!” (50). However, in a typically Atwoodian vein, things are hardly what they seem; the apparently perfect social model hides dark and dirty secrets.

In this sense, Zuboff’s concept of surveillance capitalism is useful for describing the compound. According to Zuboff, “surveillance capitalism

feeds on every aspect of every human's experience." and "Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material [...]". The Positron Project is a prime example of surveillance capitalism, as it monitors the population and exploits human experience for commercial gain. Profit is the driving force behind this social apparatus.

The Positron Project is "dressed in the fashions of advocacy and emancipation, appealing to and exploiting contemporary anxieties" (Zuboff) and appears to be motivated by the promise of a better life and social empowerment. However, the true intentions behind the project remain "hidden offstage" (Zuboff) and include constant monitoring, human rights abuses, sex slavery and mind control. Ultimately, the participants in the social project become "the objects of a technologically advanced and increasingly inescapable raw-material-extraction operation." (Zuboff). In this context, the individual is dehumanized and reduced to a mere transaction within the capitalist system. Although it is a tragic scenario, Atwood imbues it with a comic tone that not only amplifies its absurdity, but also serves as a criticism of biotechnological hubris and corporate greed.

3. Prostibots and the Female Body: Posthumanism, Bioethics and Humour

The Heart Goes Last shows a deep concern for systematic abuse, but also for how modern social systems and technological advancements redefine and challenge what it means to be human. Atwood also delves into the challenges in preserving human dignity even in the direst circumstances. This is closely tied to her interest in exploring what Appleton calls the "articulations of the female body" (62), a recurring element in her fiction. In these texts, Atwood illuminates "the endless cycles of restrictive codes that bar women from self-definition" (62). Atwood's fiction writes about bodies that carry a powerful message by exploring "the various ways in which the body becomes associated with shape-shifting, masquerade, crisis, or play (Davies 58). More than that, "fictional female bodies become battlefields where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written onto female flesh" (58), so corporeality becomes a political weapon and a means to explore wider sociocultural issues.

Atwood's interest in the female body as a site of power struggles and exploitation can be traced back to her debut novel, *The Edible Woman*

(1969), in which the protagonist, Marian, develops an eating disorder and deliberately starves herself. In *Lady Oracle* (1976), the focus is on Joan Foster, who suffered from overeating as a child and was constantly criticised for her weight. In these novels, “Each woman, finding herself disappearing in the face of social and gender expectations, sabotages her body as the only means of control she believes she has the power to enact” (Appleton 64). These early novels demonstrate set out to delve into the interplay between body shaming, societal expectations, and the female experience. These texts also chronicle the journey towards self-affirmation and ownership of one’s body (64). In her most widely celebrated novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), Atwood exposes how the female body can be subjugated and exploited for reproductive purposes, raising serious questions about body autonomy and women’s rights. Offred, one of the Handmaids, describes herself and the other Handmaids as “two-legged wombs, that’s all; sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (176).

Atwood creates a scenario in which she can “explore the disturbing possibility of complete domination over the female body” (Appleton 71) in her other dystopian novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The largely absent female protagonist, Oryx, appears as a representation of docility, “a combination of an indulgent mother and guileless prostitute” (72). Oryx seems to be lacking a sense of self, almost as if she was one of the artificially created Crakers. In this sense, Oryx anticipates Atwood’s exploration of artificial bodies and their impact on women’s rights. The desire to own and control the female body is a prominent theme in *The Heart Goes Last* too, which takes various forms within the dystopian city of Consilience. These include constant surveillance, the manufacturing and selling of prostibots, and the literal rewiring of the female brain for compliance.

One of the main sources of ontological anxiety is the creation of prostibots. These voiceless and powerless bots are artificial replicas manufactured in factories, specifically designed for sexual purposes, shipped “in amusement centres and other franchise areas” (Atwood, *Heart* 225). At the same time, these bots are artificial sex slaves that function as micro-illustrations of anxieties around control, ownership, abuse, and surveillance. Furthermore, these dolls are emblematic of the cultural anxieties related to body autonomy within the rapidly advancing field of robotics while reflecting on how “corporations can own, patent, and commodify technologically designed species” (Bouson 93).

The customisable robots in the novel can be modelled according to the buyer's wishes, even down to their expressions, which can be personalised to appear welcoming, timid, hesitant, virgin or lustful and shameless. Furthermore, these realistic dolls can be upgraded. For example, Platinum grade dolls can breathe and Platinum Plus dolls have heartbeats, epitomising the commodification of the female body within a profit-driven capitalist system. More than that, these bots can be designed to resemble anyone, including deceased celebrities, enabling users to fulfil every sexual fantasy. Playful and provocative, Atwood's parodic take is reflected in her mocking comparison of the sexual act to raping wax figures in a Madame Tussauds Museum: "It's like being able to go wild in Madame Tussaud's [...] There's a big demand" (*Heart* 264). This grotesque comparison reductive and opens up questions about sexual exploitation.

The prostibots pose serious ethical dilemmas, ranging from body autonomy to the limits of biotechnology, topics that are relevant to contemporary debates, while also investigating what it means to be human in a technologically advanced society where "Whatever you can think of, it's either up and running already or it will be" (275). Atwood's depiction of these prostibots reflects her literary preoccupation with drawing "attention to women's position within a culture that plays numerous dirty tricks on them" (Davies 62). The novel becomes a space where Atwood makes visible the ways the female body is objectified and commodified through these bots. At the same time, the bots are paradigmatic of technoconsumerist society, which craves instant gratification and fulfilment of desires. In Franzen's words,

according to the logic of technoconsumerism, in which markets discover and respond to what consumers most want, our technology has become extremely adept at creating products that correspond to our fantasy ideal of an erotic relationship, in which the beloved object asks for nothing and gives everything, instantly, and makes us feel all powerful, and doesn't throw terrible scenes when it's replaced by an even sexier object and is consigned to a drawer: that (to speak more generally) the ultimate goal of technology (...) is to replace a natural world that's indifferent to our wishes—a world of hurricanes and hardships and breakable hearts; a world of resistance—with a world so responsive to our wishes as to be, effectively, a mere extension of the self (6).

In short, technology enables consumers to replace human relationships with an idealised, blissful experience. However, this can lead to objectification

and a loss of control, raising questions about body autonomy, abuse and sexual exploitation. As embodiments of this technocentric *Weltanschauung*, the bots deconstruct the human body and biology, implying a radicalised version of bodily modification as a commodity for sexual exploitation, an idea which is echoed in the novel. For example, as the workers discuss the pros and cons of these bots, one of them says “it won’t be anything like the real thing” and “they’ll never say no. Or they’ll say no only if you want them to” (Atwood, *Heart* 147). The implication is that these replicas are artificial simulacra with no agency. They will therefore be unable to refuse sexual advances and will become passive subjects on whose bodies any kind of sexual fantasy can be inflicted, which sets a dangerous precedent for sexual abuse and rape.

As transgressive embodiments of femininity, the sex bots defy biological binaries and cannot be contained within categorising frameworks, as they are simultaneously human, machine and female, thereby destabilising traditional hierarchies. Although these prostibots challenge binaries and offer an alternative to fixed ideas of femininity, they embody objectification and commodification of the female body for economic and sexual exploitation. They also serve as a chilling warning about the potentially dire consequences of scientific advancement and the moral pitfalls of new biotechnologies, as they become a projection of technological ambition and capitalist greed. Creating them is also an act of hubris, which implies the replacement of biological functions with artificial ones to fulfil desires and create beings tailored to the customer’s wishes. By mass-producing the prostibots, corporations and scientists are defying ethical limitations.

Within the field of robotics, prostibots could be categorized as “social robots”, which can be described as “embodied artificial agents that can act autonomously in the physical and symbolic space of human social interactions” (Seibt 293). From an ontological perspective, the bots are transgressive instantiations of human desire and scientific hubris, situated in a hybrid zone between the self and the other, belonging to neither category, becoming “the site on which political power is exercised and the site on which abuse is practiced and in turn rehearsed” (Davies 58). As Herbrechter explains, “New technologies not only pose the question of the human anew and with increased urgency, but they challenge the entire humanist system of categorization and exclusion” (28-29). Atwood ponders on the same issue after Stan dresses up as Elvis to be shipped off:

“Is that all we are? he thinks. Unmistakable clothing, a hairstyle, a few exaggerated features, a gesture?” (*Heart* 296).

At the same time, these bots dramatize the encounter between man and machine, a topic central to posthumanist discourses and contemporary debates on biotechnology. As Anthes notes, “biotechnology is the stuff of dystopian nightmares, and many an apocalyptic scenario has been constructed around crazy chimeras or world-conquering cyborgs” (7). While the prostibots in *The Heart Goes Last* do not pose an existential danger to humanity, they do function as reminders of a greedy system that result in moral decadence and excessive consumerism.

Posthumanism as philosophical theory can be understood “as an umbrella term for ideas that explain, promote or deal with the crisis of humanism” (Ranisch and Sorgner 14). In the context of technological advancements and the rapidly evolving field of artificial intelligence and robotics, posthumanism appears as a relevant framework for understanding new forms of beings that radically challenge our understanding of what it means to be human, so aptly anticipated by Ihab Hassan in 1977, when he argued that

We need first to understand that the human form – including human desire and all its external representations – may be changing radically, and thus must be revisioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism (843).

Within such a posthumanist context, these bots are catalysts for reevaluating the meaning of humanism. Ironically, they exemplify human creativity and inventiveness, yet they also indicate moral degradation as they are designed exclusively for sexual activities and entertainment. Herbrechter meditates on “the progressing prosthesization of the human, the emerging autonomy of artificial intelligence, which may be about to move beyond human control or even beyond human comprehension. Welcome, therefore, to the radicalized, autopoietic information society governed by complexity?” (20). Atwood’s answer to this question is the creation of artificial sex slaves, who are denied agency, voice and identity, reduced to mere sexual objects, becoming voiceless remnants from a future in which scientific knowledge created these bots. Indeed, “Most bioethicists would probably agree that some kind of control of biotechnology is necessary in

order to protect ourselves and the environment” (Adami 256). In *The Heart Goes Last*, corporations run the biotechnology industry and technological advancement is solely driven by the pursuit of profit, regardless of ethics. This idea is emphasized when it is suggested that prostibots are more efficient than prostitutes: “A real one could only do, say, fifty gigs a day, tops, without breaking down, whereas with these it’s endless” (264). This is a prime example of the commodification of the body at the expense of freedom, an idea that can be linked to Zuboff’s surveillance capitalism. The Prostibots are the product of this system, functioning as automated embodiments of obedience that are easy to control and subdue.

In the context of a rapidly evolving world where science is making unprecedented advances, Herbrechter poses a pressing concern:

The anxious question is whether the next step of human evolution on its supposed way to posthumanity will create new forms of injustice, discrimination, exploitation and repression, or whether the stage of posthumanity will in turn lead to the complete disappearance of the human species (28).

Atwood projects a darker vision on the topic of robotics and technology as the bots embody “the disturbing possibility of complete domination over the female body” (Appleton 71). In this sense, the novel confirms Brian Attebery’s ideas according to which “The master narrative of science has always been told in sexual terms” (134), and Atwood imbues her novel with ethical conundrums and emotional depth. Some of the profound questions that these bots engender are related not only to female objectification and abuse, but also to humanity. How human are these humanoid creatures? To what extent is rape and abuse what customers do to these nonhuman beings? Should these replicas have rights? Will these bots be a getaway for rapists to live out every pervert fantasy or will they be sexual companions for lonely people?

Atwood ponders the various ethical dilemmas that these sex bots pose through dialogue which allows for inserting multiple perspectives on the topic. More specifically, Stan’s conversations with his work colleague create a polyphonic space that allows Atwood to include many voices in the narrative. These verbal exchanges which take place at the factory where the bots are assembled and personalized effectively become a complex interplay of perspectives and experiences but also ensure that no moral judgment is passed on. The lively discussion between the male workers is

filled with satirical undertones and parody, creating a hilarious effect. For instance, while describing the bots, the mixing of standard English words with vulgar expressions creates a comic effect: “The bots are supposed to be really life-like, with body heat and touch-sensitive plastic fibre skin that actually quivers, and several different voice modes, and flushable interiors for sanitary purposes, because who wants to catch a dick-rotting disease?” (Atwood, *Heart* 147). This kind of passage is also an example of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, and it involves “the layering of two or more speech manners, styles, and belief systems within the utterance of a single speaker” (Dvorak 119), allowing Atwood to parody those replicas, and, on a larger scale, to blend different voices and viewpoints into dialogic utterances. Heteroglossia allows narratorial distancing and gives the readers a panoramic view on the matter. Another example concerns the prostibots that offer “on-demand sexual experience” which is “better than a warm watermelon” (Atwood, *Heart* 148). Atwood also coins new phrases in other instances, such as when Stan refers to a prostibot as “a brain-dead trashbunny” (279). Atwood’s creative use of language reflects her “commitment to teach and to delight” (Beran 67), and the combination of such a serious topic with humour is a typically Atwoodian strategy that is intended not only to entertain, but also to encourage readers to reflect on the issues raised.

Atwood uses language to create parody by combining incongruous elements, such as serious topics with vulgar language. For instance, the Empathy Models and other humanoid robots are satirized through narratorial incursions such as “Put two eyes on anything and basically it looks like a face” (*Heart* 262). Ed’s penis “got a little bent out of shape” (324) while raping a prostibot modelled after Charmaine. This is a recurring strategy in Atwood’s fiction. More precisely, Atwood uses low burlesque when “She takes an elevated subject [...] to which she applies a deliberately low style. The burlesque contains a strong carnivalesque dimension notably in the recurrent gap between the event and the register of language used to depict it” (Dvorak 124).

Several episodes in the novel illustrate Atwood’s masterful low burlesque style. For instance, when describing the maintenance process of these bots, Atwood combines formal language with informal words:

You get to choose the voice and phrase option, the bot whispers enticing flatteries or dirty words; when you touch her, she wriggles; you give her a jump. Then, while

the rinse cycle is kicking in—that part is weird, it sounds a little too much like the drain on a dishwasher—you have to fill out a questionnaire, check the ratings boxes for likes and dislikes of this or that feature, suggest improvements. (*Heart* 148)

Gary, one of the workers, sums up the masculine viewpoints on these prostibots: “I didn’t go for it that much, myself. It was too, you know, mechanical. But some guys prefer it. No limp-dick worries if you fuck up” (243). Another worker, Kevin, compares these artificial women to bicycles, suggesting that adjustments are necessary for the best experience: “It’s like a bicycle seat, you need to make the adjustments” (244). Paradoxically, absurdly amusing comparisons that seem like innocent remarks dehumanise women and desensitise society to the objectification of women.

Atwood’s humour is also noticeable in episodes that have ontological relevance. For instance, Stan and his workmates discuss the implications of these replicas, even touching upon ontological queries such as whether these bots are better than real women or not. Stan’s thoughts reveal how deeply unsettling these robots are: “Replica women; slut machines, some call them. There was earnest talk about them among the fellow scooter repair guys: the real-life pain they might prevent, the money they might make. Maybe all women should be robots, he thinks with a tinge of acid: the flesh-and-blood ones are out of control” (243). Small talk comes at an extra cost, or as Gary puts it, “Fancy language costs extra” (256). They even joke about the bots not being able to pester them as real women would do: “There’s a plus though, they can’t pester you, like, did you lock the door, did you take the garbage out, all of that” (256).

4. Prostibots as Gothic Artefacts

In essence, these prostibots are Gothic embodiments of progress, representing the traumas caused by scientific advancement, as well as the monstrous aspects of science and biotechnology. Atwood makes use of the conventions of Gothic fiction, which are most evident in the spatial setting. The compound contains a prison and is a prison itself, even if it is disguised as a social utopia. This aspect not only hints at Atwood’s fascination with doubles but also reveals that the compound is a Gothic realm that entraps its inhabitants and feeds off their humanity, not only in

terms of physical labour, but also through brainwashing procedures and the creation of replicas.

One of the most terrifying abominations that these factories make are the kiddybots, shipped with blue teddy bears next to them to make them more realistic. Such a disturbing product which “is a big earner for Possibilibots” (276) reveal how immoral that society is as using these replicas can potentially encourage perverts and paedophiles and promote child abuse. Stan’s reaction (“That is fucking sick” (276)), expresses the seriousness of the situation. While the companies manufacture these kiddybots for financial gain, the workers justify their actions by arguing that “Jobs are at stake [...] Mega-jobs. Folks out there have bills to pay” (276). Kate Devlin, a computer scientist and self-proclaimed “robosexologist” (9), writes in her seminal *Turned On: Science, Sex and Robots* about the controversies surrounding child sex robots in contemporary society and suggests that regulation might be the best solution for the manufacturing of child sex robots (249). She also explores the potentially therapeutic impact of these robots, “particularly as an outlet or proxy for paedophiles in order to restrict offences to the virtual or robotic realm.” (247) Here, Atwood sheds light on ethical conundrums that will become increasingly relevant as technology progresses: can keeping one’s job justify doing something highly immoral? Can humans accept such a morally abhorrent invention for its potential benefits?

The Quality Control part of the factory is the most sinister one: “The space is filled with the motion of thighs and abdomens, like some grotesque art installation; there’s a soft pulsing sound and a sound of plastic” (Atwood, *Heart* 273). The whole operation evokes the sight of moving insects: “Stan reflects that, come right down to it, nothing turns him on less than the sight of a dozen headless, naked plastic bodies miming the act of copulation. There’s something insect-like about it” (274). In another instance, the place is associated with operating rooms: “it’s like an operating theatre over there. Bright overhead lights, air purifiers. They’re even wearing full caps and surgeon’s masks” (274). The lurid descriptive passages offer a grotesquely funny visual representation of the factory, and the resulting comic relief eases the tension brought on by the sinister aspects of the manufacturing process. At the same time, the passage evinces Atwood’s playful integration of the Gothic into the narrative.

Gothic is not only an important part of the novel which explores the darker side of scientific progress, but also a source of humour. For instance,

the novel reflects Atwood's fascination with a playful engagement with the construction of a "network of doubles, deceptions, and disguises" (Howells 183), a recurring trope in Gothic fiction and part of Atwood's narratives. Prostibots are the quintessential embodiment of the *doppelgänger* symbol as artificial replicas, but Atwood playfully constructs a complex web of doubles that she also subverts and challenges. Ironic twists, semantic ambiguities, and switched identities abound in the novel and duality is a driving force that underlines every aspect of *The Heart Goes Last*.

Intertextual references are also part of Atwood's parodic play, while also reflecting the Gothic undertones. For instance, as he finds himself in a box during the shipping process, Stan experiences claustrophobia and hallucinations and feels like a zombie: "*This Elvis is not a robot, this Elvis is alive! Undead Elvis! Get the garlic and the spike!*" (Atwood, *Heart* 312). The assembly part of the factory where replicas are made resembles a Frankenstein laboratory: "These body parts are man-made, they're not corpse portions, but nonetheless the effect is ghoulish. Squint and you're in a morgue [...] or else a slaughterhouse. Except there's no blood" (255).

Another extreme form of exploitation is the procedure of brainwashing through lasers, which is used to wipe out attachments and make the person compliant and in love with whoever they see first after waking up from the brain procedure. Through this procedure, "the blurring of the frontier between the robotic sexual-slave and the human is done" (Muñoz-González 144). Charmaine compares such brain fixing to fairy tales: "This is like one of those love potions in the old fairy-tale books at Grandma Win's, thinks Charmaine. The kind where you get imprisoned by a toad prince." (Atwood, *Heart* 361). The customization process is the ultimate way to dehumanize and abuse others and a breach of individual rights and freedom. Ed, the head of the Positron project, describes it as follows:

why not take an existing body and brain, and, by a painless intervention, cause that entity—that person—not to put too fine a point on it, that hot babe who won't come across for you—cause her to home in on you and you alone, as if she thinks you're the sexiest hunk she's ever seen? (358)

This is what social media sites later refer to as "Sex slaves created by neurosurgery" (388) and is the ultimate form of subjugation and abuse.

5. Conclusions

With customizable chatbots and virtual companions on the rise, Atwood's prostibots might not seem that far-fetched. As technology advances and humans integrate new technologies into their lives, it becomes imperative to delve into the potential impact of these technologies on human societies. Atwood shows particular concern for new scientific developments, such as genetic engineering and customisable sexbots, which have harmful consequences. *The Heart Goes Last* is particularly pertinent to debates on the ethics of humanoid robots. Furthermore, the novel opens up a dialogue about the technology-driven commodification of the female body. In this context, the novel acts as a cautionary tale for our times, drawing attention to the rapidly growing interest in robotics and artificial life forms.

The Heart Goes Last is deeply concerned with scientific progress and the ethical implications of artificially and radically altering human biology. Atwood extrapolates from contemporary scientific practices to caution her readers about vampiric political systems, surveillance and abuse. One of the most emblematic spatial symbols in the novel is Consilience city, the setting for the Positron Project. Embodying a surveillance capitalist system, this Gothic prison is disguised as a communal utopia. This ironic interplay between appearance and reality highlights the fact that not everything is as it seems.

Atwood adapts Gothic conventions and parodic strategies within the narrative as transgressive means to challenge conventions, but also to question the boundaries of what it means to be human and the ethical issues that arise from such challenging. The novel is useful "to help us think about problems, to test our systems and our assumptions, and to expand our imaginations" (Annas xx-xxi) and contributes to moral debates about the risks of technological advancements and the nefarious consequences that biotechnologies might engender. In other words, *The Heart Goes Last* illustrate how technological advancements and hubris can alter human condition and change the sociocultural context, warning us against the potential of technological enhancements that might lead to tragic consequences.

The novel becomes a site where Atwood can voice her concerns about female objectification, and also poses ethical questions related to robotics in a typically parodic vein. The prostibots are an essentially Gothic manifestation of a capitalist system bent on profit, and they raise questions

about the limits of scientific advancement. The bots are a challenging take on traditional notions of human agency, exposing the mutability of female identity but also sheds lights on the dehumanizing effects of technology, exploring at the same time the limits of the human body.

One of the novel's main subversive strategies is its extensive use of parody. Through this, Atwood uncovers the absurdity of posthumanist desire and the dangers of objectifying the female body in technoscientific cultures. Through her darkly twisted tale, she invites readers to reflect on moral dilemmas, shifting their engagement from laughter to unease and fostering moral questioning. At the same time, Atwood exposes the absurdity of supposedly rational scientific projects, demonstrating to her readers how easily plausible reasoning can mask sinister intentions. Some of the ways in which humour and parody are integrated into the novel include heteroglossia, exaggeration, verbal incongruity and low burlesque.

As artificial *döppelgangers*, these prostibots articulate the effects of reckless consumerism and profit-driven corporations and the destructive consequences of economic devastation and corporatist greed. These companies capitalize on human lust and the desire to own and possess others. This is even more horrifying because it is symptomatic of a society lacking ethical compass and capable of anything for personal satisfaction and financial reward. Atwood seems to suggest that scientific advancements are inevitable ("You can't stop progress." (244), however, she seems to suggest that there is still hope and change is possible by allowing the protagonists to begin a new life far from the compound and eventually letting Charmaine decide whether to stay or leave Stan.

Taking a critical look at relevant topics of modern society, such as biotechnology, human rights, and surveillance, the novel maps out various possibilities that technology can lead to. Atwood shows us how easily ethical boundaries can be trespassed when other interests are at play. In the twenty-first century, when robotics is one of the main areas of development in computer science, *The Heart Goes Last* is a valuable literary resource to better understand the ethical and societal implications of such technologies. Simply put, the novel revisits some of the deepest fears of contemporary times and urges us to reflect on our actions before it is too late.



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