

Goya's Ghosts: Surviving Rural and Urban Dislocation in Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*

Dr. Heather Levy

Western Connecticut State University English Department

50 Locust Avenue

Danbury, CT 06810

levyh@wcsu.edu

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Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009) depends upon the dissolution of urban and rural binaries. Jeanette Winterson characterizes Atwood's dystopia as "a strangely lonely book, where neither love nor romance changes the narrative, friendship of a real and lasting and risk-taking kind stands against the emotional emptiness of the money/sex/power/consumer world of CorpSecorp..." ("Strange New World" 2). What is really refreshing about this post-apocalyptic epic is that although it demonizes the usual suspects of science and mega corporate control, it does not deify nature or its most devoted caregivers. The overzealous sectarians involved in the green cult God's Gardeners are oppressive in their own quietly rigid ways. Although they sagely predict the end of the world, they can do nothing to prevent the Waterless Flood.

Toby encounters The Gardeners serendipitously while they are on one of their evangelical rounds through the pleebands. She is about to be murdered by Blanco who is a rapist and her boss at Secret Burgers. At the very last possible second, Toby evades him and runs off with the green cult. She prospers and becomes a leader as Eve Six. However, despite all of their organic care, she is never free of Blanco and his sexual revenge. Although she becomes an expert apiarist, organic gardener and herbalist, she is left with a restless discontent. Ironically, it is the artificial fruits of technology that save her since she is able to survive the Waterless Flood only because she has left the enclave of The Gardeners and is convalescing at an expensive health spa after her face lift. She has very realistically decided that the only way that she can escape from Blanco is to permanently alter her physical appearance. The Gardeners have saved her only in the short term and their agrarian utopia cannot protect her in a meaningful way. These idealists try to fortify their urban lives with organic solutions but they are annihilated along with their more craven and selfish neighbors. All of the saints and diabolical tyrants perish in Atwood's epic and that is what makes this "speculative" fiction so intriguing.

The only survivors of the flood are two young women who didn't find comfort or safety in the agrarian or the cosmopolitan. Ren lives because she has managed to find shelter in Scales and Tales, the elite sex club that features her elaborate trapeze acts. In a more predictable novel, safety could be found in rural serenity such as in Atwood's *Surfacing*, where nature offers redemption and lake water reveals painful truths for the dislocated urban woman. There is no room for a genteel rural retreat in *The Year of the Flood* and there is no time for Susanna Moodie-like self-reflection. Ursula Le Guin suggests that this dysphoric world is "seen largely through the eyes of women, powerless women, whose individual characters and temperaments and emotions are vivid and memorable. We have less Hogarth and more Goya" (46).