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*Fertility and Politics*

*Fade To White* is a novelette written by Catherynne M. Valente set in a post-nuclear war version of WWII era United States. Due to the war, the population has dropped dramatically, greatly affecting the number of fertile females and especially impacting the amount of viable males – “of the American men still living only 12% are fertile.” In the interest of preserving the American people, and, in the wider view, the human race, the society of the novelette is focused almost entirely on fertility – it influences almost every aspect of their life and culture. The story is told from two conflicting viewpoints – Martin, who wants nothing more than to become a Husband, and Sylvie, who is disenchanted with the entire culture and feels out of place in it. The novel is filled with both direct and indirect references to fertility, and it is the central theme of Valente’s work. Written in 2012, this novel also serves as a commentary on many of the political ideals expressed regarding the reproductive rights of American citizens during the ’12 elections.

One of the strongest messages conveyed throughout the piece is that the most important part of a person is their ability to conceive – that ability alone determines their worth. Both Martin and Sylvie are preparing for their Announcement for half of the piece. This event determines whether or not a young person is fertile and the tests are often invasive; according to Sylvie, “when a doctor can get that far inside you, into your blood, your chromosomes, your potentiality and all your possible futures, what difference could her white gloved fingers on your cervix make?” As the Announcement continues, it becomes more and more obvious how serious this event is, despite its gaudiness and its appearance as nothing but “a very big, very lush, very elaborate dog breeding program”, according to Sylvie. When Sylvie mentions this observation, one of the girls comes back saying, “I hope you turn out to be barren as a rock. Just *rotted away inside*.” This insult shows the importance of fertility – nothing could possible be worse than being barren. It is the worst that that could possibly be wished on someone.

This holds especially true for the males, whose viability is prized more so than intelligence or any other aspect of themselves. In a way, their ability to reproduce dehumanizes them – Grud, a friend of Martin’s, remarks that,

“They give you a magazine full of the wholesome housewives of the 1940 and tell you to do it for America. And you look down at the puddle at the bottom of the plastic tumbler they call your chalice, you chalice with milliliter measurements printed on the side, and you think: *That’s all I am. Two to six milliliters of warm wet nothing*”

Sex has become government controlled: “All sex shall be potentially reproductive. Every girl screwing a Brother is failing to screw a Husband and that just won’t do.” This means that those who can’t reproduce are not allowed to copulate, and vice versa. Even women who are infertile, called Sisters, are not allowed to copulate – it is an action saved for the top of society, the fertile, and they are allowed to do it because of their passing of a government test, and the money supplied to them by the government in order to keep them happy, healthy, and reproducing.

The obsession with fertility is impounded into the remaining citizens of the United States by means of media throughout the book. It is used to push both what Sylvie fondly refers to as “the fashionable Midwestern fertility goddess floor-model” as well as the ultimate masculine, patriotic man. In one of the first paragraphs, a future advertisement script describes a woman who is “holding up a resplendent head of cabbage the size of a pre-war watermelon. Her bicep bulges as she balances the weight of this New Vegetable.” Not only is this emphasizing the fertility of the soil to be able to host this massive vegetable, but the woman is supposed to be bursting with health, biceps rippling. In fact, later on in the notes, the editor writes “make sure we get a busty girl, so we see a little cleavage when she bends over. We’re hawking fertility here. Hers, ours.” The ad is connecting nature’s fertility and the woman’s, effectively tying the two together, echoing the concentration of the population not only on human reproduction, but the continued health of the planet. This ad is a government sponsored one, as is all of the advertisement, and the use of health in it suggests that through the government programs in place, health will be achieved.

Products also emphasize fertility. The products that the boys and girls who are to be Announced receive all reference towards fertility. The cosmetics that Sylvie is given are all varying shades of red, a color often connected with fertility. The products are entitled things like “Parable of the Good Harlot”, and in the case of a cologne Martin is given, “Oil of Fecunditas”, which is the name of the Roman goddess of fertility. An ad on the radio proudly proclaims that“Brylcreem Makes a Man a Husband”, making the advert not only suggesting that it is what defines a Husband, but that a Husband is a status that is very desirable – it is being more than being just a Man. However, it doesn’t stop with just Husbands. Infertile males are called Brothers, and are another target of the advertisements. One of the advertisements specifically for Brothers features several soldiers drinking a beverage with 5-alpha added. According to the men featured on the ads, “5-alpha leaves my head clear and my spirits high. I can work all day serving our great nation without distraction, aggression, or unwanted thoughts… I’m a patriot.” 5-alpha is a nonfictional element that lowers levels of testosterone. The inclusion of this element shows that those who drink this are not Husbands, and therefore need to be unconcerned with sex and testosterone drives. This situation, something that could be seen as emasculating, is taken in the advert and having being a Brother something that isn’t negative – they are essential, they are patriots, they serve and protect, which is still an extremely masculine concept. However, they are still unable to propagate, which makes them less important than those who can. The repeated imagery of patriotism shows the importance of the government in the society, and is a way to further integrate satisfaction with the governing body into advertisements; filling them with propaganda is the best way to boost the remaining population’s faith in the government and see it less as tyrannical and more having their best interest in mind through their attempts to give the people choice through all the different products that still do the same thing, but are endorsed by people sacrificing their lives for the population’s continued health.

Both the use of media and the obsession show by Valente’s society with reproduction parallel very neatly with the 2012 elections. The Republican Party bombarded the nation with material negating birth control options for women and glorifying women who bore children – one of the candidates went so far as to say that “rape victims who become pregnant should 'make the best of a bad situation'” and not terminate their ill-conceived pregnancies (Bates). Thi sseems eerily similar to the observations Sylvie’s mother makes when she says, “the program is the best part of a bad situation, a situation maybe so bad we cannot fix it.” This acceptance of not only a bad situation, but the government’s involvement in the program that now defines what it means to be a woman parallels all to close with the comments made during the election. The Democrats responded to the Republican ‘bad situation’ comment, claiming “The GOP wants to take us back to the 1950s on women's health” (Riccardi) which is a clear standard in *Fade to White*. There is no option of choice in the piece, for neither women nor men – reproductive rights simply no longer exist. Just like how the fictional United States is bombarded with propaganda, so was its nonfictional counterpart during the election, with both political parties cramming the airwaves full of ads supporting their own views on fertility – whether it be towards no government influence over women’s choices, or complete control. The latter is expressed in Valente’s society, where women and men’s whole lives are dictated by their ability to have children – fertile members of society are given no choice as to whether or not they wish to reproduce.

One of the more interesting bits played out through the novel regarding fertility is the connection that is made to males. While the 2012 election focused almost exclusively on the reproductive rights of women, there was no mention of males. The story takes this and flips it on its head; males are more focused on in terms of their viability instead of females. They become nothing more than a way for females to get pregnant, or government drones. This switch up speaks a lot about society – it comes a surprise to the average reader because so often, it’s the reverse, and women are the one deprived. However, women become almost empowered through the societal pressures put on men. Again, Sylvie’s mother provides insight, saying “Someday, my girl, either we will all die out and nothing will be left, or things will go back to the old ways and you will have men taking your body and soul apart to label the parts that belong to them.” While this statement has tones of misandry, it shows the freedom women have achieved through their new-found independence.

In conclusion, fertility is the most important aspect of the members of the society described in *Fade to White*. Throughout the novelette, this idea is reinforced through media portrayals, gender stereotypes and social attitude. While there are several other main themes, fertility influences most of the society and is a critical part of the plot. It informs all of Martin and Sylvie’s actions and determines how their lives will play out. This emphasis on reproduction ties in with the 2012 election, during which the reproductive rights of women was a hotly debated topic – the use of media and the idea of government controlled reproduction abounded during the election. The connection between the novelette and the reality of the political climate of the United States shows not only the author’s views, but also a potential outcome should all personal choice be taken out of the matter of reproduction.

Cited Works:

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best of a bad situation' if they get pregnant and give birth to the 'gift from God'." *Daily Mail UK*. 24 Jan 2012: n. page. Web. 9 Apr. 2013.

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