

**Limitations of solidarity
in P. D. James' *The Children of Men***

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Abstract

The Children of Men, the 1992 novel of English crime writer P. D. James, combines dystopia with the apocalyptic narrative. In 2021, England, like the rest of the world, faces extinction, as, mysteriously, global infertility has struck. The prevailing 'sense of an ending' has drained the energy of the people, who allow themselves to be ruled by the Warden of England, whom most regard as a benevolent dictator. In the secondary sources the conversion of Theo Faron, the stoic, self-regarding protagonist, is primarily read as a gradual awakening to love and faith, attesting the book a touch of the utopian and of the Christian parable. In contrast, this deconstructive reading of the novel explores the mechanisms accountable for a desolidarisation in the doomed society, which, eventually, appears to be irreversible, something glossed over in the text and in the available literature.

Keywords

dystopia, apocalyptic narrative, P. D. James, *The Children of Men*, desolidarisation

Ograniczenia solidarności w *Ludzkich dzieciach* P. D. James

Abstrakt

Ludzkie dzieci, powieść z 1992 roku angielskiej pisarki powieści kryminalnych P. D. James, łączy dystopię z narracją apokaliptyczną. W 2021 roku Anglia, podobnie jak reszta świata, stoi w obliczu zagłady w wyniku tajemniczej, globalnej bezpłodności. Dominujące 'poczucie końca', pozbawiające ludzi energii, spowodowało, że dali oni przyzwolenie na rządy Strażnika Anglii, którego większość uznaje za łaskawego dyktatora. Źródła bibliograficzne odczytują konwersję Theo Farona, stoickiego, egocentrycznego protagonisty, jako przebudzenie do miłości i wiary, nadające powieści subtelny wymiar utopijnej i chrześcijańskiej paraboli. W przeciwieństwie do nich niniejsza dekonstruująca interpretacja powieści bada mechanizmy odpowiedzialne za desolidaryzację w społeczeństwie skazanym na zagładę, która okazuje się ostatecznie nieodwracalna, czymś, co tekst i dostępne źródła na jego temat tuszują.

Słowa kluczowe

dystopia, narracja apokaliptyczna, P. D. James, *Ludzkie dzieci*, desolidaryzacja

The Children of Men is an intriguing exception among the oeuvre of P. D. James, the queen of crime fiction who died in 2014. She published this dystopian/apocalyptic novel in 1992. It has mainly been read as a text with Christian overtones and a moderately optimistic ending. This reading will be questioned by focusing on equivocations, contradictions and incongruities, intended or not, as well as on narrative gaps, one of the major voids being the absence of any overt exploration of solidarity. Another key issue of the analysis will be the web of ambivalences generated by dichotomous features and controversial motivations of the main characters.

The Children of Men blends dystopia and the apocalyptic narrative, two genres which, as Kunkel argues, conjure anti-theoretical societal scenarios:

The end of the world or apocalypse brings about the collapse of order; dystopia, on the other hand, envisions a sinister *perfection* of order. In the most basic political terms, dystopia is a nightmare of authoritarian or totalitarian rule, while the end of the world is a nightmare of anarchy. (Kunkel 2008: 90)

In entire contrast to the indicated generic features, in James's novel dystopia and the apocalypse are not opposed in terms of governance and control; quite the reverse, the authoritarian regime in dystopian England possesses and exercises the authority to maintain order. *The Children of Men* is set in 2021¹ in an England which is ruled by the dictatorial Warden and surveilled by the State Security Police. The country, like the rest of the world, is afflicted with human infertility. Yet, England, while waiting for the extinction of its population, does not tumble into chaos but is administered in an orderly, though hardly humane, fashion. The apocalyptic *zeitgeist* has generated a political lethargy, an a-political mentality which plays into the hands of the regime. As Wood maintains, "[t]he people have surrendered to a paternalistic government, welcoming despotism in exchange for security" (1994: 283), or, as the protagonist Theo Faron reflects, "people [...] no longer have the energy to care how or by whom they are governed as long as they get what the Warden has promised: freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom from boredom" (*The Children of Men* 128) Xan Lyppiatt, the Warden, and his Council of England practise social division, as an appeasement policy and instrument of power, by catering for the needs of or privileging some social groups while exploiting and eliminating others. In consequence, solidarity as a social value is no longer present. The Omegas, "[t]he children born in the year 1995" (13), are

¹ Alfonso Cuarón's adaptation for the screen of 2006 is set in 2026. For an analysis of the film version see Terentowicz-Fotyga (2011).

most valued and most indulged. Strangely enough, they are all “exceptionally beautiful”. However, many of the boys are “also cruel, arrogant and violent;” “[l]ike their male counterparts, the female Omegas seem incapable of human sympathy” (14).

The discrepant physical and moral features of the last generation of the human species establish a further opposition in the text. The old generation in this divisive society is less fortunate. Those who are no longer useful, have become or may become a burden to the community, are disposed through a euthanasia programme, which is euphemistically advertised as “Quietus”. The “sojourners”, workers from abroad who have been lured into the country, forced to do undesirable jobs for very little money, are kept in camps (men and women separately), and then are sent back when they reach the age of sixty. Criminals who have been convicted of deeds of violence are sent to the Isle of Man, which has been turned into a penal colony where the prisoners are left to their own devices: “The island is a living hell. Those who went there human are nearly all dead and the rest are devils” (90).

Theo Faron, an Oxford don specializing in Victorian history, incidentally the cousin of the Warden, is the prototype of the depoliticised citizen, withdrawn into himself, the epitome of an individualist who has settled more or less comfortably into his privileged position in this desolidarised apocalyptic world. With no sense of social responsibility or communal belonging, he does not even feel attached to the members of his family. Mattson and Lagrand perceive him as “an emotional and moral cripple – unable to love parents, wife, child, or himself” (2012: 283). Theo is certainly the least likely candidate to join a group of dissidents, which could be regarded as another fault-line of the novel, together with the group’s inadequate solidarity. While sociologists affirm that “solidarity is constructed and reproduced in the process of struggle”, when activists are exposed to repression and persecution (O’Hearn, 2004: 493), such “solidary cultures of resistance” (O’Hearn, 2004: 492) are more or less absent among the dissidents in *The Children of*

Men. Although the members of the Five Fishes, the rebel group in the novel, have a common aim, that of changing the policies of the Council of England or overthrowing the repressive system, they have all their individual, private, motives and view each other with suspicion. Theo sums up the deficits of this amateurish assemblage of rebels:

I can't think of any group less equipped to confront the apparatus of state. You've no money, no resources, no influence, no popular backing. You haven't even a coherent philosophy of revolt. Miriam is doing it to avenge her brother, Gascoigne, apparently, because the Warden has appropriated the word Grenadiers. Luke out of some vague Christian idealism [...]. Rolf hasn't even the justification of moral indignation. His motive is ambition; he resents the Warden's absolute power and would like it for himself. [Julian is] doing it because [she is] married to Rolf. (*The Children of Men* 156)

Not solidarity but distrust determines the relationships among the dissidents. Rolf, the self-appointed leader of the group, and Theo, the new member, dislike each other and keep arguing about strategies. Rolf even secretly leaves the group. Miriam is convinced that “[h]e's changed his allegiance. He's always been fascinated by power. Now he's joined forces with the source of power” (*The Children of Men* 277).

Theo only joins the group with great reluctance. Most significantly, he does not do so for any ideological or moral reasons. Moreover, it is not a rational, well considered decision. Theo is lured into associating with them until he reaches a point of no return and is more or less forced to leave his former life behind. He is well aware why Julian, the attractive young rebel he has fallen in love with, is chosen to approach him: “He might despise them as a gang of amateur malcontents, but they had outwitted him, had sent the one member whom they knew he would find it difficult to refuse” (*The Children of Men* 97). From the very beginning Theo is drawn into an internal conflict between his fascination with Julian and his rationality,

sound judgement, need of security and desire for comfort. Even after his first involvement with the group he keeps trying to suppress his powerful feelings for Julian: “It was a romantic impulse, childish and ridiculous, which I hadn’t felt since I was a boy. I had distrusted and resented it then. Now it appalled me by its strength, its irrationality, its destructive potential” (186). It is symptomatic of his dilemma that he simultaneously “plan[s] [his temporary] escape” to the continent and commits himself to the woman to whose charms he has fallen prey: “If you ever need me send for me [...] and I’ll come” (188), only to immediately regret his pledge. When Gascoigne is caught by the State Security Police, and, most importantly, because Julian is, miraculously, pregnant, she sends for Theo. From now on the group is on the run and Theo is inescapably entangled with the dissidents. “He was with them by choice but there had been no choice. It was to Julian and her unborn child, and to them only, that he owed allegiance” (228). Mattson and Lagrand construe a complete change of heart from the description of an intimate moment, when Theo hears and feels the child in Julian’s womb: “[*Eros*] enriches Theo’s determination to secure other people’s good. He is freed first for friendship, then for love, and finally for a tentative approach to Christian faith” (2012: 286). However, there is no textual evidence that Theo develops any interest in the common good or in religious ideas. Even after this instance of emotional, almost mystical closeness, Theo analyses his position with rigorous rationality: “All he had on offer was reason, argument, intelligence, and he had put his faith in them all his life” (*The Children of Men* 217). He is still trying to suppress his profound sense of connection but through his knowledge of the pregnancy he is virtually trapped and tied to The Five Fishes: “He might well try to escape commitment but he couldn’t now escape knowledge” (222). While Mattson and Lagrand (2012: 287) claim that these experiences “gradually shift him from a complacent rationality to a moral and spiritual sensitivity”, Theo’s acrimonious reaction to Luke’s view that

“[t]he child belongs to God” (*The Children of Men* 219), confirms the opposite: “Christ! Can’t we discuss this at least on the basis of reason?” (219). Notwithstanding Theo’s repeated attestations of rationality and agnosticism, Mattson and Lagrand stylize him into a repentant infidel on the road to conversion: “His experience of erotic love transforms him from a person at home in the world without a god to someone standing on the brink of terror in a world in which he suspects that God lives” (2012: 287). Likewise, Ralph C. Wood, ignoring the unparalleled incompetence of the Five Fishes, the lack of solidarity, the spirit of jealousy and mistrust among the group, misreads Theo’s involuntary recruitment as his transformation into a committed social and political reformer: “[...] Theo comes to see what is wrong with his solitary and self-protective life, what is right about the life of mutual trust and solidarity” (1994: 286).

In terms of the religious agenda of *The Children of Men*, Julian is the key figure. She has decided to improve society “because God wants [her] to” (*The Children of Men* 157). From the very beginning her religiously inspired mission is infused with her quixotic idealism: “[W]e have to change the moral will. We have to change people” (93). Her pregnancy in this infertile, doomed universe must be regarded as a miracle; she appears to save the world by facilitating a new beginning of the human race, perhaps, becoming the foremother of the revived human species. However, the darker side of this central Christian figure undeniably subverts or even controverts the Christian argument of the novel. She is married to Rolf, the self-opinionated, confrontational leader of The Five Fishes, whom she no longer loves or has never loved at all. She allows herself to be impregnated by Luke, a former priest, whom she does not love either, and uses her charms to lure Theo into getting involved with a group of rebels. Julian’s wish to give birth to the child in secret may be primarily politically motivated – to prevent the regime from exploiting mother and child and thereby enhancing their prestige and power. On the other

hand, the venturous enterprise to keep them out of the hands of the Warden and the Council for long, is totally impracticable and naïve. Moreover, to deliver the baby on the run, somewhere in the wild, puts the mother and her child at considerable risk. Julian's insistence on the delivery in secret is, essentially, her personal choice, which further underscores her self-centeredness. In this context the opposing positions of Julian and Theo as to social responsibilities correlate to the overall pattern of 'fault lines'. Julian, the putative spiritual reformer and political activist, ignores any considerations of the communal good by deciding to give birth to the procreative saviour of humanity in secret and keep him away from the public. In contrast, Theo, the self-sufficient, self-absorbed cynic, lacking any interest in the well-being of his fellows, reminds the group of rebels, and particularly Julian, of their obligation to the world at large: "You aren't children with a new toy which you can keep to yourselves, play with by yourselves, prevent the other children from sharing. This birth is the concern of the whole world, not just England. The child belongs to mankind" (219).

Julian's unfaithfulness to Rolf has another serious consequence. During the attack of the Omegas Luke sacrifices himself to allow the rest of the group to escape. Julian abandons herself to sorrow. She claims that Luke died to save her and "[kneels] by Luke's body, cradling his shattered head in her lap, her dark hair falling over his face" (*The Children of Men* 263). This unrestrained demonstration of grief provokes Rolf's fatal question: "Whose child is she carrying?" (263) Julian's answer that she is sure that it is Luke's child triggers a moment's tornado of rage; after some time of consideration, Rolf clandestinely leaves the remaining members of the group, Julian, Miriam, and Theo. They are convinced that Rolf will give the sensational news – that of the existence and possible hiding place of a pregnant woman – to the Warden. From now on they are not simply some dissidents in flight from the authori-

ties but the most wanted people in England, their capture of national, or even global, interest.

In standard moral terms Julian can be considered a loose woman. In a conversation with Theo, she openly admits the underlying selfishness and sinfulness of her behaviour, undeceiving him about her defects of character: “ ‘[Y]ou didn’t think I was a saint.’ ‘No, but I thought you were good.’ She said quietly: ‘Now you know that I’m not’ ” (*The Children of Men* 268). Towards the end of the novel, the Warden expresses his view of Julian’s immorality in more direct terms: “She may be the most important woman in the world but she isn’t the Virgin Mary. The child she is carrying is still the child of a whore” (337). The biblical allusions, particularly the circumstances of the birth, for example the setting of the ramshackle woodshed and the ‘visit’ of the Council of England, comparable to the visit of the three magi, are clearly problematized by the Warden’s harsh assessment.

A further minor yet essential inconsistency in the novel relates to the idea of procreation and concerns Julian’s deformity. When Theo looks at her more closely for the first time, very early in the book, he notices that “her left hand was deformed. The middle and forefinger were fused into a nail-less stump and the back of the hand grossly swollen” (*The Children of Men* 55). In the infertile apocalyptic world, particularly in totalitarian England, eugenic principles determine the measures to remedy the infertility problem, as Theo knows: “[...] at least, he thought, she had one compensation. No one who was in any way physically deformed, or mentally or physically unhealthy, was on the list of women from whom the new race would be bred if ever a fertile male was discovered” (56). Among all women it is exactly Julian who becomes pregnant. The irony at the heart of this miracle is never addressed in *The Children of Men*. The phenomenon that the new human species will evolve from what the regime has hitherto considered genetically impure material is not explored at all, neither is the significant

antinomy that it is not one of the physically flawless Omegas who may save humanity.

The ambiguities of the novel are clearly spelt out at the end of the text. In the theatrical confrontation between the Warden and Theo, reminiscent of duels or shoot-outs in Western movies, a rather Unchristian contest, a kind of supernatural, divine, intervention is introduced. Of course, one may also regard it as a theatrical trick: “[Xan] stretched his arm and took aim. And it was in that split second of time that the child cried, a high mewling wail, like a cry of protest. Theo heard Xan’s bullet hiss harmlessly through the sleeve of his jacket” (*The Children of Men* 337). The narrator interprets the child’s crying as a protest, probably against this atavistic, ungodly, encounter. However, it can also be read as an interference in support of Theo: the wailing of the child disrupts the Warden’s concentration so that he misses his target, Theo remains unharmed and can shoot “Xan through the heart” (337). The child, miraculously, has not only saved the world from extinction but has also helped to liberate England from her dictator.

These are the positive implications of the ending of the novel. Yet, there is also a darker, less hopeful aspect to it. Theo takes the ring, the symbol of power, from the finger of the dead Warden, thus assuming absolute control himself, a claim to power the members of the Council of England immediately understand and accept. In his typical manner, Theo analyses his new position, “this sudden intoxication of power [...]. The sense that everything was possible to him, that what he wanted would be done, that what he hated would be abolished, the world could be fashioned according to his will” (*The Children of Men* 341). Although he hesitates, the sheer magnetism of omnipotence appears to overwhelm him at this moment: “He drew the ring from the finger, then paused and pushed it back. There would be time later to decide whether, and for how long, he needed it” (341). Theo’s reaction to Julian’s critical remark, “[t]hat wasn’t made for your finger” (341), casts legitimate doubts on his suitability as the political saviour of England.

The inability to take criticism with equanimity and tolerance as well as a dominant disposition or even an emerging authoritarian trait hardly qualify him to re-establish democracy: “For a second, no more, he felt something close to irritation. It must be for him to decide when he would take it off. He said: ‘It’s useful for the present. I shall take it off in time’ ” (341). After these political considerations the novel ends on a religious, a Christian, note with a sentimental touch. Julian asks the new Warden to christen the baby after his father Luke and after his rescuer Theo. While the latter is performing the rite “[h]is tears [are] falling over the child’s forehead” (342). Positioning this pathetic scene at the very end of the novel may be intended to foreground the religious agenda. Yet, a momentary surge of emotion cannot substantiate Theo’s progress to Christianity; essentially, he remains a rationalist, who, paradoxically, has come into power through saving the woman he loves. Moreover, his immediate fascination with power does not bode well. Ralph C. Wood’s overall assessment of the book appears to disregard the ambiguities, the contradictions, and the fault-lines of *The Children of Men* altogether: “[...] James’s novel [...] is a book of surprising, indeed apocalyptic, hope. James wants to suggest a way out of our cultural and religious *cul de sac*, to disclose the nature of divine rescue, to reveal the springs of redemption” (1994: 285). This extremely biased, pronouncedly Christian interpretation of the novel has nothing to do with the text, elides its complexities, particularly its dialectical strategies, and fails to probe its subtextual dimensions.

The Children of Men, with its antinomies, gaps, and ambiguities, leaves the critical reader in search of a meaning. There are only two certainties at the end of the novel: 1) opposition to an authoritarian system does not spawn solidarity, not even among a small group of dissidents, 2) there is new life on the planet, the apocalypse is called off. Whether the performance of Christian rituals will engender a Christian society and whether the country will reintroduce a democratic system remains more than uncertain.

This interpretation clearly contradicts P. D. James's own perception of her work as voiced in an interview with Ralph C. Wood:

When I began *The Children of Men*, I didn't set out to write a Christian book. I set out to deal with the idea I had. What would happen to society with the end of the human race? At the end of it, I realized I had written a Christian fable. (James qtd. in Wood 2002: 353)

The present analysis provides an alternative view of the novel by uncovering the 'textual unconscious' (Barry 2002: 71).

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