

Regeneration

Renee Christopher

Vince

Griswold was different than I thought it would be, pleasant and carefree like the place I had come from. Back in Richardson there were multiple cottages with one or two couples in each one, three at most. The streets were on a grid pattern and the buildings were all close together. I had never seen anything like this. The streets in Griswold twisted and turned like some hideous circular maze and most of them were one-way roads. It was strange and disorienting. I felt like the whole world was spinning; only I was at the core watching everything go round.

522 Johnsey St. Here it was. I stuffed my hands in the pockets of my faux leather jacket and crossed the street. I felt a foreign anxiety as I approached. I was always sure of my place in this world as a forefather, but this place dwarfed my sense of stature.

On top of giving several women their freedom, I had also contributed heavily to the next generation that would carry on our benevolent work. As boys, we had no choice in the matter. *Fathers born to father all* was the inscription ingrained in our minds since birth. We had no mothers, only fathers then to repopulate our earth. My grandpa would tell me stories of the time before in Gilead; how he wasn't sure if they were right after all. Many of his friends were purged before the wash out, and he was surprised that he made it out unscathed.

I stopped at the wrought iron fence, as tall as I was, that encased the old Victorian mansion. It must have been pristine long ago when they first rebuilt the cities. Now it was covered in vines and the front steps desperately needed work. There were several windows, all with curtains drawn tight shut, but I could see a few shadows moving behind them. It stood two stories high, but more than wide enough to house at least four couples. It needed more than a paint job and the foundation was cracking.

9 Months Later

Shannon

Last night I found something in the basement. I went down to get a trinket for Ricky because Dana was having trouble sleeping again. Everyone suspected that the dreams were back, but no one said it out loud. We just tried to soothe her, especially Anne, who was due any time. This was Dana's second miscarriage in the second trimester. Ricky was never harsh with Dana about it even though it was her fault. She shouldn't have been cooking so much. She shouldn't have been doing the cleaning. There were other women in this house to do those things.

She would never tell me the truth, but I knew he had caused the first one, and it was likely the same scenario now. He was not the first man to become attached to a woman and risk life itself to be with her. Sooner or later, a Collector would come for a baby and notice the way his glazed eyes followed her every move. They'd reassign him and punish her for distracting him from his duty.

I reached up to choose one of those boxes that play music, the ones with spinning ballerinas, and a cardboard box crashed to the floor. A cloud of dust billowed around it and I bent down hastily to put everything back in order. There was a brown leather book inside, but its pages were blank. I knew what a book was, but I'd never seen one before. Were they all empty like this one? How could they be dangerous if they were empty? I wouldn't know how to decipher the code inside in any case. I hid it underneath my shirt and carried the music box back upstairs.

Ricky eagerly took the box from me and set it on the bedside table. Dana was sleeping calmly now, but any minute the screaming could start again. She claimed to have no memory of what happened in the dream after she awoke. I never asked.

"Goodnight Ricky." I paused at my mistake and immediately lowered my eyes.

"Father Ricky," I corrected myself. He gave me a dangerous look and waved me away.

I didn't have a chance to kiss Dana on the forehead. May peace be with you sister.

I went to my room and took out the brown book. I didn't know how to use it, but for some reason it was still something that I wanted to keep. It made me feel like I had something no one else did; a secret. It was forbidden and I was terrified someone would find me out and I'd have to go back to the white room.

The white room was inside a tall smooth building close by where they took women for checkups. We didn't talk about these, so we only knew what they did to our own bodies, not our collective. My past Father, Harry was especially persuasive. He convinced them that my attitude was put on, that I wasn't performing a companion's duties to the best of my ability. I was punished and instilled with a panic that made me jump at Harry's voice. I told myself I'd never go back, but the panic remained.

I couldn't let that happen again, but there was no good place to hide the book. I stuffed it under my side of the mattress just before Vince walked in. Father Vince, I mean.

"Try again tonight?" he asked. He brushed the light brown locks off his forehead and put his hands in his pockets.

This still startled me. I felt the ever familiar apprehension seep out of me, but in a slow and safe way. Vince asked. Before him, they never did, and we never said no.

"Dr. Linz said we won't know for another four weeks." I always put a smile on for Vince, even when I was sick, which wasn't often. Vince was nice from the start, but I wasn't fooled. I wasn't convinced that he would stay this way. They never make it past six months without at least hitting us. "It can't hurt to try again though."

"Great!" He disrobed and quickly slipped under the covers next to me to begin his usual ritual. It was slow and gentle; he was seemingly in no rush. I thought he would stop a few times. He didn't. There was no talk, not that I wanted it, but sometimes he would mutter something I couldn't understand. It always sounded like the same phrase and that made it a little better. I couldn't say that I enjoyed

sex with Vince, but I didn't hate it either. After all, he was meant to regenerate me.

Vince

I think it worked this time, I thought as I watched her walk stiffly around the room, picking things up and putting them back down. She was nervous. I was sure it worked this time. If there was one thing I was good at, it was keeping my cool under pressure. I never lost my head. Sure these last months have been especially trying, but I knew I'd get it done. Today's the day.

"Are you ready, Shannon? He should be here any minute now." She stopped fiddling around and looked at me. Her bright blue eyes hid behind thick lashes as she shifted her gaze to my feet.

"What if it doesn't work again?"

"It will. Dr. Linz will be able to tell and everything will be as it should."

I didn't like it when she got like this. The other women I'd been with were always excited, hopeful. They wanted out almost as if they were programmed to have that single desire. I wanted Shannon to believe in me. If they hadn't thought I was competent, they wouldn't have sent me. Didn't she know that?

There was a sharp knock on the door and I scrambled to answer it. Shannon stayed behind in the room.

"Afternoon, Mr. Vince." He tipped his hat and pushed his wire rimmed frames up further along the bridge of his aquiline nose. He carried a brown briefcase in his hand.

"Dr." I beckoned him to follow me into the room. I liked to be by the front door, right next to the action. I had Shannon moved here before I arrived.

"Afternoon, Ms. Shannon." He put his briefcase on the dresser. He patted the bed. Shannon walked over and sat beside him and the doctor took her hand.

The test was positive last week. It couldn't be a fluke, we did three of them. Dr. Linz would say congratulations Shannon, the results came back and you're pregnant.

"I'm sorry, Shannon, but you aren't pregnant." He awkwardly patted her hand.

"No!" I shouted. I wanted to attack him. How could he joke about this? Today was the day. Shannon just sat there, her hand in his, her eyes dry.

"I'm sorry Mr. Vince, perhaps next time. I'd best be off now." Dr. Linz walked out without another word. Just another house call for him.

"I'm sorry Vince." Shannon looked up at me with those dry eyes and I didn't understand her. Why didn't she cry? Was she broken? It wasn't my goddamn job to fix her if she was, and I knew it wasn't me. She had been here for three years. How was she still standing?

I picked her up off the bed and shook her hard. I yelled something in her face, spittle making wet freckles across her cheeks. She had no response for me. I pushed her away and slammed the door on my way out. I needed some air.

She acted as if it meant nothing. The first few disappointments were the same, only I thought she was just being strong. That she had some kind of faith. But she was utterly empty today. Come to think of it, she never seemed to have any thoughts that didn't align with mine. Given, she was a woman, but I've met many others who were uncomfortable with me, who noticed the man beneath the suit and shied away. Some even resisted outright.

At first I enjoyed that, but it soon grew tiring to have to restrain them, and then there was the yelling. Their experiences were too obvious. I liked Shannon's subtlety, the way her face never changed, the way her hands slid mechanically up and down my back, her nails digging in. It was as if she was too afraid to let me see her. It couldn't be that she enjoyed it. I've never met a woman who did. They all knew what came after; nine hard months of preparation for the birth, and then the bittersweet taste of clean, free air on the other side.

Shannon

I knew he'd be upset. Today was supposed to be the big day. I don't know why it hasn't worked yet. We both did everything right. I guess it was about time for him to become a little rough. I knew it had to happen sometime.

I took out my brown book and opened it. I scratched it with my fingernail, but nothing showed. I couldn't find a way to mark it. So I held it open on my lap and let a few tears dampen the middle of a page. They weren't for him or for me, but for everyone who found forbidden treasures and hid them away for a little piece of respite.

I heard him come in some time later. I pretended to be asleep. I wasn't surprised that he'd lost his temper, but it seemed that he didn't really have one for so long. It's the quiet ones that you need to watch out for, Dana told me. They'd kill you soon as they got the chance. I didn't believe that about Vince, but I was no fool nonetheless. I've heard the stories.

There seemed to be something a bit off about Vince, but I could never say what. Dana didn't think he was as nice as he seemed, and I didn't care either way. Maybe he really was one of those quiet types. I wouldn't be here much longer in any case. Whether it was the white room or something worse, I knew my time was near. Maybe I should just save them the trouble and do it myself. That seemed all of a sudden more appealing. Why hadn't I done it yet?

I didn't particularly mind staying here. I liked Dana and the other women. Perhaps they were giving Vince a little more time with me than usual. He was their last hope after all. I was content to stay asleep and let them figure it all out.

I couldn't avoid Vince forever. Eventually, I'd have to wake up.

I padded into the kitchen to find him sharpening a knife. There were vegetables sitting on the table and a pot of broth simmering on the stove. Dana was standing on the other side of the counter, her arms folded across her chest.

"I told him it was fine, but he insisted." She gestured to his turned back with a fearful look in her eye. Father Ricky will be upset that Dana didn't do it herself.

"Vince, that's really thoughtful of you to help Dana tonight. She should rest, don't you think?" I stood next to Dana and patted her back. It was all I could do.

"Oh yes, it's been a rough few days with the loss of the baby. She should rest." He turned around slowly, setting the knife down on the counter. He smiled.

Dana didn't need to be told twice. I heard her bedroom door close and Ricky's raised voice.

"Now, you can cut the vegetables. I'll handle the meat." I swallowed the panic that immediately threatened to overtake me. My breath came quick as I picked up the knife carefully. I felt my underarms dampen with sweat and my stomach churned as I eyed the silver blade. Dana always did the chopping. She never asked why. It was like an unspoken courtesy among the women here. Did Vince somehow know about my aversion?

It's all a bit hazy, but I remember the sharp breathlessness of the blade as it entered my side. I couldn't move and my body was submerged in a lake of fire. I lay on a metal table, my arms and legs bound. I couldn't distinguish one voice from another. They all sounded excited about something. *The right kind of woman, to bear the right kind of children. For the future.* I tried to move my head and then everything went black. I woke up in Griswold with Dana at my bedside.

I positioned a tomato on the cutting board and cautiously brought the knife down to rest on top of it. I made the first cut with slow precise strokes, feeling as if someone was watching me. I began on the second tomato when I felt Vince's arms wrap around my waist and his hard length pressed against my back. My body jerked involuntarily and he chuckled, but didn't release me.

"We'll make up for today, don't worry. I know you are sorry about the baby."

I nodded. He kissed my neck and turned back to his meat.

I held the tomato firmly against the board and started to cut again, the tenderizer echoing my pounding heartbeat.

Vince

I was so worked up from this morning's events and eager to get back in business. I wanted to make things right between us. This time I planned to seduce her out of that blankness. I wanted to know what she felt. I hoped it wasn't fear actually; that would be easy. I suspected it was something more.

I turned at Shannon's gasp and the clatter of something hitting the floor. Splat, splat. Two big drops of blood dotted the white tile. Shannon faced me, clutching

her hand close to her breast, staining her shirt red. Tears welled in her eyes and I saw fear for the first time. She stepped back into the counter at my approach. I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. I had the overwhelming urge to run from her, as if she was suddenly going to shed her skin and transform into some monster I couldn't fathom.

I didn't speak. There seemed to be something otherworldly about the silence and I wanted it to last forever.

"Let's clean you up, ok?" I gestured to the bathroom down the hall. She didn't move, so I gently grabbed her by the elbow and led her into the bathroom. Her face was statuesque and her eyes showed nothing once more as I rinsed the blood off her hand. The cut wasn't too deep.

"There, now I'll finish dinner. Are you alright? Do you want to lie down?" I was overtaken by this strange instinct to protect her. She seemed fragile all of a sudden, like any wrong move on my part would shatter her into a million pieces. At the same time I wanted to destroy the thing in front of me. Those eyes had haunted my sleep ever since Dr. Linz's visit and sometimes I thought I saw them in my own reflection. They were all like this; from the beginning, they were made for one thing, but this was changing.

For the next few days Shannon was just as sweet, but just as hollow as usual. I tried to comfort her, but I could tell she wasn't having any of it. She flinched when I touched her, but tried to cover it up with meaningless tactile overtures. The words she spoke were dry, and died before they came out as the rote memorization they sounded like. She seemed nervous all the time. I thought something had definitely gone wrong with the wiring. She was becoming unhinged.

What the hell was going on?

Shannon

My body couldn't seem to stay still of its own accord. I needed to move. I paced, I chewed my nails, and I twirled my hair. I still had sex with Vince. I repeated the motions as usual and he remained the same, if more consuming. He seemed

after something more than my body, more than the baby. I wanted to know what it was in the back of my mind, but it didn't seem like something anyone could ask.

I was never outright afraid of Vince before. I noticed the claws retracted behind the cuff links and the filth that made an invisible stain underneath his coat, but I suppose since he wasn't flaunting it, he wasn't going to use it. The others always made a big show of themselves before stripping themselves of exactly what they boasted of, but not Vince.

I snuck peeks at the brown book more and more, and it seemed to be trying to tell me something that I couldn't figure out. It kept me up at night along with Dana's cries and Vince's tossing and turning. I should have known I wouldn't be able to hide it forever.

I walked into the bedroom a few days after the knife incident and found him sitting on the edge of the bed with the book in his hands. I froze.

"What the hell is this?" He stood up and waved the book around. "Where did you get this?"

"In the basement," I whispered.

"Do you have any idea the trouble we'd be in if someone found this?" He hissed and held the book close to him.

"I didn't think it'd be any harm, really. They only come for the babies, Father Vince."

"How could you be so stupid? This will get us all killed. I'm getting rid of it!" He started towards the door, but I skirted around him and pressed my back against it. I was sure he'd lose it now. I would get more than a shaking this time, but I didn't care about my body for once.

He was as shocked as I was. I didn't realize how much I wanted it until someone threatened to take it. I didn't move and neither did he.

Vince

It seemed like a nightmare come out of the darkest shadows of my past. I remember my grandpa telling me about his dad's books and The Great Fire that consumed them. It seemed like a glorious tale of war and I was enthralled. I asked him if he ever owned one and he laughed. No one had for years. His great-great aunt may have once, but he didn't know anything about that.

I felt like I was reliving this scene from another place, another time. Maybe I had dreamed it. Shannon was something rogue incarnate standing before me like a doll suddenly come to life. My mind reeled, but my feet were planted and I clutched the book for dear life. If I let it go, everything would fall apart. I could hit her, but I wasn't that man. A Father does what it takes for the baby. There was no baby, but someday there would be. It didn't make sense to damage the carrier beforehand. Maybe that was why she'd failed before.

Her eyes! What bright blue orbs of refracted light that finally showed me something. It wasn't fear. I stood in horrified wonder at this thing, this woman, who suddenly made me feel like a mote of dust in the basement. I wasn't angry anymore, but I damn sure wasn't going to let us be caught. I wanted to know why she kept it.

"Let's just hide it in a better place then," I set it down on the bed.

"I'm going to get some tools. I'll be right back."

Shannon

I hurried to the bed and snatched the book up. I couldn't believe I had been so careless with it. I felt panicked and I didn't trust Vince. He seemed to change back and forth with no warning like a chameleon blending in to the background. I just didn't believe it. I had to leave. I secured the brown book underneath my shirt with a thin strip of cloth from my dress and walked quickly to the front door.

Never had the thought occurred to me that I could leave Griswold. Even when women had recovered fully from their pregnancies, they were escorted to their next place of residence by a Collector. They were provided with the basic necessities and a husband. We were companions after all and not meant to be

alone. But I wanted more than my freedom on the outside. I just didn't know yet what that could mean.

I turned and looked down the hallway for the last time. The only regret I had was that I wouldn't get to say goodbye to Dana. Somehow, I knew she would never leave this place. The nightmare had too soon become real for her. I ran my finger over the book once more and turned the knob. There was no going back.

I got a few blocks when I heard Vince's voice. I walked faster. He caught up to me and grabbed me by the arm. I jerked away and the book fell to the ground. I dove for it, but Vince was quicker. He tried to back away, but I lunged at him and we landed in the street, the book a couple of feet away. My heart was pounding as I raced toward it, arms outstretched. Almost there.

Then I was violently tugged back, my shirt ripping at the seams, and fell atop Vince. A car screamed past inches from where we were as we breathed hard and shuddered. The book was a few feet away, undamaged. We both breathed heavily and then a miraculous thing happened. My face contorted and a bubbling sound came from the back of throat. It was a little hard to breathe and my body convulsed slightly. I couldn't remember the last time this happened. What was even more surprising was that it was happening to Vince too. Neither of us had moved.

"We have to go back," he said after he'd caught his breath. I jumped to my feet, snatched up the book, and started walking.

Vince scrambled to his feet and walked quickly beside me, but didn't try to physically stop me again. I expected him to knock me out and drag me back, but instead he tried to talk me out of it. Why didn't he use the power he had? He'd had several chances in the last half hour. He couldn't have been serious about hiding the book. This was all just part of his plan. They always had plans.

After a while, it was clear that I had no destination. As the sky began to darken, Vince told me about these places called hotels where people would stay overnight when they were traveling. If an Officer saw us, we'd be taken into custody and questioned. Neither of us had bothered to change out of our blue

attire. Blue was a color reserved for us, the Peoples' People meant to carry on a legacy that should have died with Gilead.

Vince

I woke this morning uncomfortably warm under the blankets. I had the feeling that I couldn't move and my heart was beating too fast. Shannon lay next to me, clutching the book, still asleep. I threw the blankets off and discovered a light brown stain on the pillow where my mouth was. I only drooled when I dreamed. I couldn't remember it.

The past forty-eight hours seemed like a dream itself, a lifetime ago. I expected Shannon to be pregnant the second time, maybe the third if we were somehow off by a day of her cycle. I was supposed to be gone by now, on to the next one. Yet I was here, and didn't feel the urge to move on. I was brilliantly fascinated by this woman, who seemed to be transforming into something I couldn't quite name.

All of my teachings and my grandpa's stories drenched me with knowledge about how this was supposed to work. I knew my job as a Father in my very soul. There was something definitely wrong with Shannon, but I wanted to see how this played out. Why are we here? I should go right back to Griswold and report her. Then I'd be in danger of aiding an escape. Death. I couldn't do that either.

Shannon rolled over as if she could hear me thinking. She mumbled a good morning before something clicked and she remembered where we were. She sat bolt upright and pulled the covers up to her chin even though both of us were fully clothed. There was so much unsaid last night that we wore our blue shirts like a shield as endless as the sky.

Well, we couldn't be silent forever, although my throat was a bit hoarse from my futile attempts to persuade her to return to Griswold. It never occurred to me to just let her go.

"Shannon—

"I'm not going back." She stared at nothing in front of her, and then turned to me.

"Of course you can. We just haven't hit the mark yet." I didn't know what she was getting at. I had adjusted quickly to the talking machinery in front of me, but I wasn't prepared to give up hope just yet.

"Maybe we should get a doctor, one from the outside. I can pay him to keep quiet."

"Fine." She turned around and lay down again. I got up, took my shirt off and decided that was better than being caught and leaving Shannon to fend for herself.

"I'll be back in a little bit, ok. Don't worry."

She was silent. I locked the door behind me.

Shannon

I got up and paced the room after he left. What if he came back with an Official, or worse, a Collector? I couldn't get away since I'd depleted my luck yesterday when I roamed the streets in blue. I didn't dare go out again. I had no choice but to wait and see.

A while later Vince came in with a much older man who introduced himself as simply Alan. No Dr. He stooped and had soft green eyes that apologized to me from a long time ago. He set down a small black bag and remained standing, his hands clasped in front of him.

"Hi Shannon, I've been told you haven't been able to get pregnant for a number of years with continuous attempts. Can you tell me anything about your medical history?"

I looked at Vince and he nodded. Ok.

They did some tests, but assured me I'd still be able to have a baby. I, in the white room, they..." I didn't know how to describe it. I didn't know what happened and if I thought about it too long, I had a bad feeling I would retreat to a place I thought I had escaped.

"That's ok. We'll just take a look then. Vince, would you mind giving us some privacy please?" Vince silently closed himself in the small bathroom while I lay on the bed with my arms across my chest. He set up his equipment and smeared a cold jelly over the raised scar that trails across my stomach. A few minutes later he gasped and put his hand over his mouth. He looked up at my face and turned away quickly.

"What is it?" He didn't reply, but began to wipe the jelly, now room temperature, off of my stomach. I pulled my shirt down and stood up. Alan remained seated.

"Vince, would you come in here please?" The knob turned and Vince stepped out before Alan could finish speaking.

"When I was a boy, great grandmother came to live with us for a couple of months because she was very sick. My mother made her as comfortable as possible, but there was nothing they could do. They couldn't fix her."

"I'm sorry," I resisted the urge to ask him what that had to do with anything.

"When she was strong enough, she'd tell me a story. It was the same one every time. I thought maybe she forgot she'd told it to me already. It was about a woman, I suspect it was her in her youth, who wore what she wanted, went out in the darkness, and never let anything get in her way. That woman died in Gilead, but her body kept going, diseased flesh on the run."

"Is Shannon sick, Dr. Alan?" Vince took a step closer to us.

"Yes," he turned to me and said, "You don't have very long. I am sorry."

I blinked and it was as if I knew it all along. They did this to me, and couldn't repair it. It was their mistake. It wasn't that my body wasn't as desperate as my mind to keep from returning to those stark white chambers; it was because it was incapable. The ground swam in my vision as I pitched forward. I didn't know if Vince would catch me.

Vince

I had no time to process before Shannon fainted at the news. I was dumbstruck; cancer was thought to be eliminated decades ago. My mouth felt dry as I helped Shannon sit back down on the bed. I went to the bathroom to get a wet towel for her, but also to take a look in the mirror. Anything could be happening inside my body and I'd have no idea. Nothing was wrong, but everything was changing.

I went back in the room and it was the same.

"I can give you some medication for the pain, or you can come to my office." Alan stood up and began to pack his things. Shannon continued to sit unmoving on the bed. I saw Alan through the door and returned to her side. I didn't mean to say anything, but I couldn't control myself.

"We can go to them; they know how to fix this. We can get you treatment. Everything will be ok."

I waited for a response, but when none seemed forthcoming. Then she stood up and walked to the window. She looked out for a second and then turned to me.

"Them?" Her eyes flashed, crazed. "They did this to me! They put something inside of me and it went wrong. Don't you think they would have fixed me if they could so that I could fulfill my duty? Why would they let you keep trying for so long?"

She was right. They would have taken her back and fixed her, or killed her, if they knew about the tumor. It didn't make sense for her to be here.

"They don't know about the tumor then. But they must be coming for you soon. Dr. Linz reported to them right after he gave us the news. We can't stay here. Alan may know what to do."

My mind was working, seemingly at speeds otherwise unknown, but before I could say anything else, she picked up the book from the bed and walked to the front door and put her hand on the knob.

"No, Vince." I couldn't believe my ears.

"No? Don't you want to get out of this place? Have a chance to live before you die? We can go underground; be outsiders. Don't you want a husband, a family?"

"I never wanted any of that."

"What then?" I asked in disbelief.

"I'd tell you, if I'd ever had the chance to think about it." And with that she walked out the door.

Shannon

I left Vince open mouthed in the hotel room. If he followed me, I wasn't aware. Nothing touched me; nothing broke through this barrier that I held up. It was like a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I ran my fingers over the pages of the brown book one last time. I walked down the hall and stepped out into the street where two Officials and a Collector were waiting. I went quietly.

Beneath the Veil: A Critical Self-Commentary

This critical companion piece is an expansion of the origins of the creative piece "Regeneration". I will briefly deconstruct some aspects of my work and unpack some things that may have remained hidden. I will focus on one chunk from the perspective of Vince and one from the perspective of Shannon to unpack some of the ideas found in my piece. Some aspects that I will discuss in the following close reading include structural choices and the language of each character, as well as what I hoped to achieve with this piece and what I hope readers will gain from it.

My research focuses on the intersection of the gothic and the science fiction genres. I am particularly interested in how post-humanism informs our ideas about gender roles, our bodily autonomy, and our agency within these genres. I have chosen to work with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which speculates about a world where people are controlled by a system where they are defined only in terms of their biological sex. Some initial questions raised include: Are women still stuck in the madhouse? Are our bodies our own? How do these genres categorize women and humankind overall? This is also a post-human project based on the ideas of automatism and theory of mind. After reading *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, I began to think about the dynamics of power and a system where humans are controlled by self-restraint. This story argues that the definition of the human being is a static one in the post-human world, which is still in the process of being expanded. It has developed from the Cartesian subject into a bioengineered product of corporate greed and power, an idea not yet placed in this story. It explores popular themes in science fiction such as bodily transformation, new world order, and futuristic technology.

This project started as an exploration of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley as one of the most prominent bridges between the gothic and early science fiction. The focus began with a genre analysis, but expanded to readings that explored the ideas of otherness, isolation, and madness that occur in both men and women. Then it developed into a rich text for new ideas about the uncanny as discussed by Sigmund Freud, Masahiro Mori, and Ernst Jentsch. My early assessments tended to align with Freud's idea of the uncanny as a thing once familiar, made unfamiliar. I combined this idea with Mori's uncanny valley, in which increasingly accurate representations of human life make us proportionally more

uncomfortable with the representation. This begs the question often asked in post-modern literature: What is it that makes us human in this increasingly technological world? How close are we to the edge of the valley?

My research then examined *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro as a key text in the subject of post-modernism, the construction of the human body, and the agency we have dependent on our bodies. This idea drew out more feminist readings about the commodification of women's bodies and the attempts to control reproduction in Atwood's piece. These ideas also raised questions about how empathy, memory, and trauma contribute to the narrative structure itself in both the gothic and science fiction genres. In both works, memory serves as a strength for the narrator, a way to structure a traumatic event.

The creative portion of my thesis resembles Atwood's more speculative fiction world, but contains elements of the gothic and soft science fiction. It takes place in the same Gilead with a different name, but farther in the future than the end of Atwood's novel, so that the Gilead the readers know is almost regenerated in a way. The story deals with several different ideas, most of them touched on lightly above.

This piece is told in first person present from two perspectives and this narrative strategy allows the reader great access into the minds of each character. Their thoughts are fairly direct; it is why they think them that is a mystery. The reader must decode their motivations based on the historical background given, which is in the process of being expanded, and the way they behave socially. Some of this piece seems to be told in interior monologue and this is to focus on the way characters associate things in their thought process. For example, when Shannon drops the book in the street and runs after it, she notices her body's reaction: "My heart was pounding as I raced toward it, arms outstretched. Almost there" (12). This kind of internal awareness sheds light on the importance that Shannon associates with her body and its changes. She gives no thought to self-preservation at this point in the story, only to the symbol, which signifies a kind of detachment from her previous defining quality, her body. I kept the individual sections as short as I could without leaving too much out so that the reader could get a chance to sympathize with Vince, or at least close to it, as well as experience it as a quick switch between two different perspectives in order to quicken the pace.

Vince's excerpt from page twelve portrays a way that characters may use memory to make sense of a traumatic event. His first thought is to compare this

scene in front of him to a nightmare (12), and he then goes on to recite a memory that he associates with his feelings brought up by this particular moment in the present. It is no ordinary memory of himself, but a memory of his "grandpa telling [him] about his dad's books and The Great Fire that consumed them" (12). At the time of the storytelling, he describes this Great Fire as "a glorious tale of war" (12). As an adult he fails to make the connection that history tends to repeat itself. He "felt like he was reliving this scene from another time, another place" (12) and in some ways he is. He is his grandfather staring at a world where nothing seems quite right and change is once again a source of anxiety. He relies on his memory to get him through this situation as a coping device, similar to the way Kathy in *NEVER LET ME GO* uses her memory to make sense of what happened when she was a child.

When Vince encounters Shannon with the book, he experiences the event similar to how males experience the Gothic sublime. He describes Shannon as "something rogue incarnate standing before me like a doll suddenly come to life" (12). He recognizes his feelings repressed fear associated with the book burning, like his grandfather must have been, and projects these feelings onto his current situation, making Shannon a familiar object that is now unfamiliar in her state of change. She approaches the edge of the uncanny valley and Vince reacts to this with both awe and terror when "[he] stood in horrified wonder at this thing, this woman, who suddenly made [him] feel like a mote of dust in the basement" (13). This is a typical reaction for men when they experience some form of nature that they can't comprehend in the Gothic genre, such as when Victor is in awe of the Alps in *Frankenstein*. At the end of the scene, his awe overpowers his terror and he decides to keep the book. He begins to see himself as something more than just a "father to father all", but he doesn't quite make it to a standpoint where the readers can truly identify with him and like him just yet.

Shannon is a product of a second patriarchal overthrow of the system, but it is not so obvious to her as it is to Offred of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The historical background is not well developed in the piece because the focus is on how these two people interact with each other and how others react to them. Like the *The Handmaid's Tale*, Shannon does not have full bodily autonomy or agency, but it is more relaxed here in order to reflect the purge at the end of Atwood's novel. Shannon's ability to think for herself is restricted by her illiteracy, but as the story progresses, she becomes aware of her seemingly blank state after Vince finds the book. She says "never had the thought occurred to me that I could

leave Griswold" (13). She is essentially controlled by an ingrained sense of the cop on the corner, or the Panopticon theory designed by Jeremy Bentham. This states that in a circular room where everyone can see this person, the person will not behave in an outright criminal or deviant way. Shannon lacks a direct history, and her only memories she brings up are of the "white room", leaving the readers wondering how she came to be this way. This provides ample space for them to project their own histories into this piece and therefore strongly identify with Shannon as she blindly fights her way to the realization that she is only identified through her body in this world, not as an agentic human being.

The woman's body, with a large amount of research already, is still a symbol that can be decoded and projected in ways that shape the way we think about gender, agency, and science today. Shannon's body, as a female body, is made into nothing more than a reproductive center for repopulation. Her lack of past events memory, and focus on her body in the present draws attention to her lack of agency in the beginning of this piece. When Vince wants to take the book from her she reflects on her surprising reaction: "I didn't realize how much I wanted it until someone threatened to take it" (12). This book represents a place where she can think freely even though her body is restricted until this moment. The 'it' in this statement can be several things, and that is where the reader can fill in some past experience and associations with contemporary issues.

The control of reproduction as a result of science is present in the protagonist's memory of the white room, where they experimented with her reproductive system, but accidentally activated a benign tumor. While Vince relies on his memories to inform his world, Shannon appears as a blank slate upon which the reader has ample room to fill in their own experience, just as Shannon realizes she can do, only too late. For Vince, Shannon increasingly represents something familiar that is becoming unfamiliar and thus uncanny. The changes she undergoes cause him to reinterpret his world. Just like in *The Handmaid's Tale*, characters empathize with others as a coping mechanism and a way to remind themselves of their humanity.

In this new world, the traditional gender roles are tightly cemented in place and they direct the reader to the problematic binary that operates in today's world. Like in the Gothic and Atwood's work, women are kept inside, kept from information, and surrounded by domineering male figures that threaten her physically and mentally. Perhaps the biggest question that this work engages is: Now that we have access to an almost incalculable amount of information, how

do we use it to maintain our sense of humanity? Do we construct our bodies out of scientific and quantifiable information such as Victor did with his creature? Are our bodies the last word concerning our agency? Do we control ourselves or are we no better than the machine that brought us Youtube?

In this work, I hoped to create something that teased out questions about what's going on in our world today as far as the gender binary, social identity, and how these labels affect the way we see ourselves and other human beings. These issues are at the root of many problems facing today's society and many people struggle to fit in to categories that are only becoming narrower. The way we define ourselves as individuals is just as important as how we define ourselves as human beings. How we choose to do this is fascinating, especially in a world with so much information about our bodies, our minds, and our society, and the technology that offers us a new slew of ways to categorize ourselves.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Random House, 1986. Book.
- Christopher, Renee. "Regeneration." Undergraduate thesis. University of California, Santa Barbara. 2013.
- Donnelly, M. *Managing the Mind: A Study of Medical Psychology in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain*. London: Tavistock, 1983. Book.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. London: Random House, 2005. Book.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. New York: W.WW Norton & Company, Inc. 2012. Book.