

How does Wyndham portray his female characters in the novel?

Definition of terms used in the essay

- Patriarchy : Patriarchy is a social system in which positions of dominance and privilege are held by men.
- Heteronormative: denoting or relating to a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation.
- Marginalized: marginalize refers to the act of treating a person or group as though they are insignificant by isolating and/or disempowering them.

Point 1**:
Wyndham portrays his female characters as a critique of the repressive patriarchy in Waknuk. In Waknuk, a female's value is closely aligned with her ability to reproduce and thereby all pressure of failure or success in reproduction lies with women. Emily Strirm is a prime example where she yields to religious piety, despite "failed" "births". Waknuk's judgment falls on her alone for the defects of her babies and assumes responsibilities for her moral failure. The indoctrination of Waknuk ideals of what a woman should be is portrayed in Sophie's mother as she laments to Johnny "why are you so sweet to me when all I've brought you is ----". Sophie assumes all the blame for bearing a defective child, even though this was clearly out of her control, and she cannot bear to speak of it. Aunt Harriet, another female character in the novel rejects this precepts as cruel and unethical as she says "I've done nothing to be ashamed of" and proceeds to commit suicide. This is poignant as it shows that female characters have relatively few options within a repressive society like Waknuk. It is a terrible environment to be in especially when suicide was the ultimate rejection of the world she lives in but nothing to change

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it expect to make David realise the irreducible othersness between him and his family. Anna and Harriet can only escape the repressive forces through suicide and even Rosalind and David were willing to kill Petra rather than to let her fall into the hands of the militia. Therefore, the portrayal of females is seen as tragic in an oppressive society in Waknuk, where their choices are entirely limited to (1) conform or to (2) escape through death.

Point 2: Wyndham portrays the female characters by showing uneven character development to effectively convey the lack of agency the women have in the novel. Rosalind is portrayed as a “was handsome, with a face you could not help watching; she was attractive too”, and “was competent, decisive, (and) self reliant”. Wyndham paints her as strong, Amazonian in physique and intellect, emotionally mature and perceptive, idealistic rather than cynically pragmatic. As “leaders” of the group alongside Michael, Rosalind frequently protects others with her bow. In the first half of the book, she is the ideal standard of a feminist character, and yet it transitions when Wyndham reveals unevenness in her female character development. After being attacked by deviants, David said Rosalind is “aware by instinct” that “she was in a hostile world and deliberately equipped herself to face it” where she constructed “a character so thoroughly” that she “almost deceived herself”. Rosalind is revealed to be tender hearted, wanting the comfort of others stronger than herself, where the Amazon was a facade to survive the “hostile” conditions. The men, like Uncle Axel, have contradictory, rich psychologies and experiences that can coexist, but for Rosalind, one must turn out to be fake and the other “true”. The feminist version is the one that peels off and reveals the essential female of Wyndham’s time beneath. It is not will or intelligence which enables Rosalind to adapt to her “hostile world” it was “instinct”. Therefore, Wyndham drains the agency out of the liveliest of his characters.

Point 3: Wyndham portrays the female characters struggling to subscribe themselves to the traditional roles of women. Anne, the oldest of the psychic teenagers, whose difference is invisible, throws herself into a frenzy of conformity and self subjugation by marrying Alan, Sophie's betrayer, and isolating herself from all her previous connections. Anne takes on Alan's name, leaving her old identity behind like a good Puritan wife would have done. This traditional, patriarchal requirement that a woman cede her own autonomy in marriage is presented critically by Wyndham. It was Anne's "misery, perpetual lack of confidence and insecurity" and "prospects of a lifetime's guarding against slips" where David and others instinctively knew that Anne would fail to repress her identity. She points out that there is not a lot of other options for women when she realize the numbers don't add up, when she claims "what is going to happen to the other two then -- two will be on the outside? They won't be in any group. Do they mean they ought to be cheated out of everything?" The heteronormative, patriarchal society of Waknuk defines women's roles as domestic and reproductive. Without a husband, Anne would be marginalized in her community. Although the others reject her decision, there is a cold logic to it that cynically accepts the realities of the world Anne lives in.

References

Krome, F., Loving, G., & Reeves, C. P. (2015). **The concept of the human in John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*: Puritanical imagery, female agency, and theistic evolution.** *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, 32(2), 52-64.