



How are the connections between social change and sexuality explored in texts studied on the module?

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Sexuality is an unavoidable part of society and thus many connections can be made between it and social change. This essay will examine the portrayal of these connections in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (BNW) (1932), Katharine Burdekin's *Proud Man* (1934) and Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook* (2000). Focussing on three main areas — sex and equality, sex and the self, and sex and feelings — this essay considers how utopian fiction comments on social change by presenting potential future realities.

Sex and Equality

Unsurprisingly, in the novels by writers with associations with feminism (*The PowerBook* and *Proud Man*), the connection between social change for the better and sexuality is made through the assertion that social improvement involves equality of the sexes. Indeed, Leonora in *Proud Man* asserts that if women and men could work together, not only in physical sexual union, they could create wonderful things 'and end up with a new world'.¹ The importance of this 'unit of power'² is further reinforced in *The PowerBook* where Ali declares that a 'relationship where one person has no power or negative power, isn't a relationship, it's the bond between master and slave'.³ This power imbalance suggests that few affirmative relationships can be formed in society until the inequality between the sexes has been rectified.

However, in both novels equality cannot ultimately be achieved since sex dichotomy inevitably leads to inequality. This inequality is described in *The PowerBook* where the female Ali is worth little to her family due to 'the mystic laws of gender'.⁴ The word 'mystic' here introduces the idea that gender and sex are not concrete but imagined. Feminist writer Judith Butler defined sex as a contrived categorisation that is 'produced within a binary framework that is conditioned by heterosexuality'.⁵ Although written before Butler, *Proud Man* also challenges the binary categorization of (sub)humanity ('a privilege of sex divides it [society] vertically').⁶ The form of the novel allows the reader to objectively analyse a familiar culture through unfamiliar eyes. The reader is removed from their 'subjective narrow vision'⁷ and even the most foundational aspects of society appear alien. This analytical form allows the reader to consider the possibility of change in the most rigid aspects of society, particularly sex. In *Proud Man*, sex dichotomy is not only shown as non-essential but unnaturally damaging to (sub)humanity ('their bisexuality was the cause of unbelievable

¹ Katharine Burdekin, *Proud Man* [1934] (New York: The Feminist Press, 1993), p. 178.

² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³ Jeanette Winterson, *The PowerBook* [2000] (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 186.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵ Gill Jagger, *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the power of the Performative* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008), p.

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⁶ *Proud Man*, p. 17.

⁷ Daphne Patai, Foreword in *Proud Man* [1934], by Katharine Burdekin (New York: The Feminist Press, 1993), p. xi.

pain, discomfort and grief').⁸ The 'Person' suggests that sex dichotomy can only lead to 'despising, fearing and misunderstanding'⁹ or a constant quest for 'superiority'.¹⁰ Ultimately the 'Person' explains that for real social change to be enacted, both sexes must lose their desire to be 'important'.¹¹ As long as competition endures, equality can never exist between the sexes.

However, in *Proud Man*, this competition will exist until women lose their ability to create life. This ability leads to 'a deep root jealousy of the female's greater biological importance'¹² and thus men reduce the social power of women to compensate for their own biological inferiority; male social dominance prevails. However, I disagree with Patai's assertion that 'above all, Burdekin was concerned with the pervasiveness of male power and female powerlessness'.¹³ I believe above all, Burdekin was concerned with complete sex equality. Indeed, a world where females have both social and biological superiority is just as harshly criticised as a male dominated society. It is warned that 'the privilege would merely be reversed, and possibly it would be more oppressive and more cruel'.¹⁴ The only possible solution that *Proud Man* offers for sex equality is not social empowerment of women but a loss of women's biological superiority. Were this to happen, the 'Person' predicts that 'the root jealousy of the male would disappear, and there would be nothing to prevent a lasting peace between the sexes'.¹⁵ Therefore in *Proud Man*, the solution suggested for positive social change is the loss of women's biological importance, leading to an equality between the sexes.

Yet, this utopia imagined in *Proud Man* is undoubtedly similar to Huxley's dystopian future in *BNW*. In this novel, society has achieved what *Proud Man* predicts, a society of asexual reproduction. As childbirth is replaced by machines, so the biologically superior woman is lost. Whilst *Proud Man* predicts a utopian sexual equality rising from this, *BNW* presents a society still saturated in inequality.

March's assertion that 'the genders appear equal within the social order'¹⁶ in *BNW* seems largely unfounded. With the exception of the school headmistress Miss Keate (who is almost immediately sexualised by Bernard), all positions of authority in the novel are occupied by men. The students in the opening are all boys and, throughout, the only prominent female character exists as an object of the males' sexual desire. Reiff's assessment that 'no woman in Huxley's Utopia has power'¹⁷ seems far more appropriate. Furthermore, women in *BNW* not only lack social power but are also degraded further. Replaced by efficient machines, the notion of female fertility has become taboo. The very word 'mother' is 'smut'.¹⁸ Not only have women lost their value as child-bearers, they have gained the detriment of being potential 'pornographic'¹⁹ viviparous creatures. This society presents a more disturbing outcome to the suggested social change in *Proud Man*. In place of equality, the attempt to remove competition between male and female seems to have only widened the gap between the sexes.

For extreme social change to occur, extreme approaches to sexuality need to be explored. The lack of equality between the sexes in *BNW* is an inevitable outcome while the

⁸ *Proud Man*, p. 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³ Patai, Foreword in *Proud Man*, p. xiv.

¹⁴ *Proud Man*, p. 31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Christie L. March, 'A Dystopic Vision of Gender in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932)', *Women in Literature: Reading Through the Lens of Gender*, ed. Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber (Connecticut: Greenwood, 2003), p. 53.

¹⁷ Raychel Haugrud Reiff, *Aldous Huxley: Brave New World*, (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2009), p. 77.

¹⁸ *Brave New World*, p. 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

basic sex dichotomy remains. Although Gottlieb argues that *BNW* shows ‘the birthing process of creatures no longer human’,²⁰ it is arguable that social change regarding sexuality is minor due to the characters being too human. Indeed, in *Proud Man*, the ‘Person’, after reading *BNW* notes that, ‘the children in the novel, when they grew up, exhibited nothing but common subhuman characteristics [...] he could only describe men and women [...] how they actually seemed to him in his real life’.²¹ For *BNW* to portray any real social change, it first would have to make extreme changes to society itself, the people. Regarding sex dichotomy, Huxley makes few changes from his contemporary society. Thus few changes are seen regarding sex equality.

This overlooking of sex binaries is understandable. As Patai writes, ‘most utopian fiction is governed by conventional and unexamined gender ideologies that undergird (though, indeed, they often undermine) an author’s depiction of a supposedly “different” society’.²² The notion of sex dichotomy is so foundational to contemporary society that, when imaging a ‘brave new world’ full of startlingly radical changes, the sex dichotomy remains incongruously unchanged. Winterson also warns the reader of this unawareness in *The PowerBook*. She writes, ‘We believe in our own unreality too strongly to give it up’.²³ This ‘unreality’ includes the imagined sex dichotomies in society. Our desperation to apply our perceptions of sex to the world is shown in the reader’s need to attribute a sex to the ‘Person’ in *Proud Man*. Without the comfort of gendered pronouns, the reader is uneasy. The title plays on this need, promising the reader definite gender before subverting this expectation. Similarly, the author’s use of a male pseudonym (Murray Constantine) creates further sexual ambiguity. The reader is forced to abandon their preconceived and reductive notions of sexuality and consider more extreme possibilities of social change.

Both *The PowerBook* and *Proud Man* demonstrate this extreme social change. In both novels, ultimate equality is achieved through the abandonment of sex dichotomy altogether. In *Proud Man*, the ‘Person’ has destroyed dichotomy by merging male and female to become androgynous. Not only is there now a lack of competition and hate between the sexes, there is also a lack of unhealthy dependence on each other for the survival of the species. The ‘Person’ is ‘independent of others both physically and emotionally’.²⁴

In *The PowerBook*, rather than merging the sexes, there is a detachment from the notion of sex completely. Although Front argues that ‘Winterson conjoins them [the two sexes] [...] which takes on the shape of androgyny’,²⁵ Ali, in fact, avoids embodying both sexes (as in *Proud Man*) and is instead able to, as Andermahr argues, ‘transcend and evade sexual difference’.²⁶ She is not androgynous but sexless, ambivalent to gender (‘Male or female?’ ‘Does it matter?’).²⁷ This ability to separate from one’s sex is informed by the environment in which Winterson’s novel is set. Set in cyberspace, Ali’s assertion that ‘Nothing is solid. Nothing is fixed’ is very true.²⁸ Lacking any commitment to physicality, the virtual world ‘is a kind of utopian horizon where the sexed body is loosened of its proscriptions’.²⁹ The form of the novel further reinforces the unpredictability of both

²⁰ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal: Queen’s University Press, 2001), p. 78.

²¹ *Proud Man*, p. 226.

²² Patai, Foreword in *Proud Man*, p. xiv.

²³ *The PowerBook*, p. 18.

²⁴ *Proud Man*, p. 22.

²⁵ Sonia Front, *Transgressing Boundaries in Jeanette Winterson’s Fiction* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 101.

²⁶ Sonya Andermahr, ‘Cyberspace and the Body: Jeanette Winterson’s *The PowerBook*’, in *British Fiction of the 1990s*, ed. Nick Bentley (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), p. 113.

²⁷ *The PowerBook*, p. 26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁹ Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, ‘Lusting Toward Utopia: Jeanette Winterson’s Utopian Counter-spaces from *The Passion* to *The PowerBook*’, in *Winterson Narrating Time and Space*, ed. Margaret J-M Sönmez and Mine Özyurt Kılıç (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p. 73.

cyberspace and sexuality. Utilising the ‘potentially liberating structure of postmodernism’,³⁰ the novel’s non-linear narrative and meta-fictional style communicates uncertainty and ambiguity. The novel and its setting form the ultimate ‘no place’ of utopia and in this ‘no place’, one can logically have no sex. However, Ali is not restricted to being sexless, having what Jørgensen describes as a ‘bisexual mind’.³¹ Ali asserts that ‘this is an invented world’ where sex can be assigned at will.³² However, rather than this affirming the existence of sex dichotomy as Front argues,³³ this further reveals the superficial, transitory nature of sex.

Sex and gender in *The PowerBook* are predominately portrayed as illusion. In the novel sex can be changed with the mere addition of tulip bulbs. Social change can only follow the acceptance of sex as illusory. By demanding the removal of superficiality (‘Undress. Take off your clothes. Take off your body. Hang them up behind the door’),³⁴ the novel emphasises the importance of the true self. The body is the external societal signifier of sex — ‘structures without cladding’³⁵ refers not only to the self but to society. As individual bodies hide individual selves, so the collective social body hides the collective social self. For social change, any superficial sex signifiers must be stripped away and true sexuality revealed.

Both *Proud Man* and *The PowerBook* encourage the destruction of sex dichotomy to achieve equality and instigate positive social change; whilst *BNW*, by maintaining the sex dichotomy, demonstrates the negative outcomes of its endurance. By questioning the very foundations of sexuality, the novels suggest that social change begins with changes to the very structure of sexuality as we know it.

Sex and the Self

In all the novels, sexual intercourse involves a breakdown of boundaries and a change of self. In *Proud Man* it is suggested that ‘As the female and male body fit together, so might the female and male mind’.³⁶ It is made clear that sexual intercourse is not only physical but emotional and mental. Sex extends beyond the mere physical moment and may offer the opportunity for meaningful change within the individual.

In *The PowerBook*, it is during sexual intercourse that Winterson identifies utopia: ‘There are no frontiers or controls. [...] I am free to come and go as I please. This is Utopia. It could never happen beyond bed’.³⁷ Here utopia is achieved through the breakdown of boundaries and the destruction of preconceived concepts. Whilst the freedom of cyberspace discards the sex dichotomy, sexual intercourse discards the self. This is evidenced when, after spending the night with a woman, Ali asks ‘who was I last night? Who was she?’³⁸ It seems that Jørgensen’s suggestion that ‘a search for love is a search for self’ is untrue.³⁹ In fact, love, which in *The PowerBook* is predominately associated with sex (discussed later), leads to a loss rather than a discovery of individual self. To compensate for this loss of self, sex in the novel also leads to the forming of a new collective self between the lovers. When Lancelot describes sex with Guinevere he feels that ‘Your marrow is in my bones. My blood

³⁰ Fiona McCulloch, ‘Boundaries. Desire: Spatial Inter-Acting in The Powerbook’, *English: The Journal of the English Association*, 56:214 (2007): 57-71 (p. 61).

³¹ Marie Herholdt Jørgensen, *Empty Space and Points of Light: The Self, Time, Sex, and Gender in Selected Works by Jeanette Winterson* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2005), p. 125.

³² *The PowerBook*, p. 4.

³³ Sonia Front, *Transgressing Boundaries*, p. 113.

³⁴ *The PowerBook*, p. 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁶ *Proud Man*, p. 178.

³⁷ *The PowerBook*, p. 175.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁹ Jørgensen, *Empty Space and Points of Light*, p. 94.

is in your veins'.⁴⁰ Through sexual intercourse, positive realisations of shared selves are created. Thus, positive social change is established on a personal level.

In *The PowerBook* this merging of selves is portrayed in a positive light with the act of sex praised as utopia. However, in *BNW* this similar catalyst of social change is used to control rather than liberate. As Jacoby warns, 'dystopias are commonly viewed not as the opposite of utopias but as their logical fulfilment'.⁴¹ *BNW* explores the 'utopian' loss of self in sex as a means of controlling the populace and maintaining unity in a dystopian society. By encouraging sex, the state also encourages the loss of individual self. With the constant merging of identities through promiscuous sexual intercourse, people become collectivised and thus controllable. 'I drink to my annihilation',⁴² citizens chant before engaging in a group sexual act; the 'I' is lost through sex for the good of society.

Promiscuity is encouraged by Orgy-Porgy and the proverb 'everyone belongs to everyone else'.⁴³ In this way, the merged self that occurs in sexual union, described as a utopia in *The PowerBook*, becomes a tool to encourage societal group mentality. Not only does everyone belong to everyone else, everyone becomes everyone else. The chant in the solidarity service ('waiting to come together, to be fused, to lose their twelve separate identities in a larger being') overtly demonstrates the reduction of the individual through sex for the good of society as a whole. What may have been a catalyst for a liberating utopia is used to change society into a controlled dystopia.

Sex and Feeling

The novels also all emphasise the importance of sex and feeling in society. Indeed, in *Proud Man*, the 'Person' criticises the (sub)human imposed sexual limits when they are suited to life involving free and polygamous sex. The 'Person', from their objective viewpoint, seems perplexed by the various social constructs that appear to contradict natural (sub)human tendencies. They label 'life-long virginity' as 'an extraordinary unnatural vice'⁴⁴ and describe monogamy as 'very rarely possible between sex-antagonistic subhumans'.⁴⁵ These criticisms are reminiscent of the characters in *BNW* who also find the lives of past humans difficult to comprehend. When told that children were forbidden erotic play and all people were encouraged to remain chaste until marriage, the students are shocked by 'the amazing truth'.⁴⁶ In both cases the future beings see the prevention of natural urges as illogical and even cruel.

Due to the (sub)human attempt to rile against their 'naturally polygamous' lifestyle,⁴⁷ the 'Person' in *Proud Man* explains that this can cause mental and even physical damage. They talk of a 'sex-itch'⁴⁸ that (sub)humans have to constantly live with due to lack of gratification. They also predict that (sub)humans 'will become increasingly weary of each other until in the tedium of their sex lives they acquire one of the many nervous diseases to which subhumans are subject'. Monogamy is not only unnatural, it is damaging to society. It is made clear that positive social change must involve a change in attitude towards sex. A better society is one where humans can indulge in their natural urges.

However, once again, the positive social change imagined in *Proud Man* becomes far more sinister when found in *BNW*. Society in *BNW* allows humans to indulge in their

⁴⁰ *The PowerBook*, p. 69.

⁴¹ Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 30.

⁴² *Brave New World*, p. 70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴⁴ *Proud Man*, p. 45.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁶ *Brave New World*, p. 35.

⁴⁷ *Proud Man*, p. 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

naturally animalistic, polygamous desires. Young children's sexual play is described a 'charming'⁴⁹ and all culture is sexualised with 'feelies' and 'sexophones'. However, this sexual liberation is not to free the people but to encourage stability in society as a whole. The state, recognising that 'feeling lurks in that interval of time between desire and its consummation',⁵⁰ has removed feeling from sex through the destruction of this interval. 'Sterile Sexuality',⁵¹ devoid of feeling is achieved through instant gratification, reflecting the society's general commercialist values. Those with sexual prowess are described as 'pneumatic'⁵² which further reinforces the mechanical nature of sexual intercourse in the novel. The populace derives as much pleasure from sex as from any other form of entertainment provided by the state, such as Electromagnetic Golf.

Ultimately, this polygamous, emotionless sex is encouraged by the state to maintain social stability. As Mond states, 'feeling strongly [...] how could they be stable?'⁵³ Huxley himself writes that the aim of the state is 'not anarchy but social stability'.⁵⁴ Sexual promiscuity, however anarchic it may appear to the reader, is the ultimate stabilizing force in the society. By controlling the emotions of the individual, one controls the stability of the state. As the proverb runs, 'No social stability without individual stability'.⁵⁵ Thus monogamy itself becomes a danger to society. Throughout the novel it is clearly discouraged and labelled as 'horribly bad form'⁵⁶ and proverbs further warn of the dangers of becoming emotionally attached ('When the individual feels, the community reels').⁵⁷

Witters identifies 'free love' as an inappropriate term to describe the society in *BNW*. He argues that polygamy in the novel cannot be 'free love' as it isn't 'set in opposition to orthodoxy'.⁵⁸ As the established orthodox is polygamy, 'free love' is not an appropriate term for the predominate sexuality in the novel. However, the term 'free love' can still be used to discuss *BNW* by describing the monogamous relationships instead. These are the relationships that are unorthodox and threaten social stability. Thus whilst polygamous, instantaneous sex may appear to gratify natural human needs, it is, in fact, a further contribution to the controlling nature of the dystopian state. Yet again, the suggestion of positive social change is realised negatively in Huxley's dystopia.

Whilst *Proud Man* and *BNW* seem to offer only two options for the human race: emotional but scarce sex or emotionless but plentiful sex, *The PowerBook* suggests an alternative. In *The PowerBook*, sex is not understood as a biological process alone and is instead closely intertwined with love. Thus, in the novel, emotionless sex is an impossible concept. As discussed earlier, utopia is located in the act of sexual intercourse and thus, as sex and love are inseparable, the only way to utopia is through love; or, as Wagner-Lawlor describes it, 'an exploration of the psychic economy of human love'.⁵⁹ Interestingly, Ali acknowledges that this also entails pain but, just like Mallory's quest to climb Everest, the pain is worth the utopia. For Ali, *BNW*'s society 'where you can have as much sex as you like but love is taboo' would be a 'strange world'.⁶⁰ *The PowerBook* certainly encourages sexual liberation to instigate positive social change; however, with this sexual liberation must come love, and, also pain. Unexpectedly, this feeling of pain is valued in the utopian novel whilst

⁴⁹ *Brave New World*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵¹ Doris Dier, *The Motifs of Utopia and Dystopia in Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World'* (GRIN Verlag, 2012), p. 11.

⁵² *Brave New World*, p. 44.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁴ Aldous Huxley, Foreword in *Brave New World* [1932] (London: Paperview/The Independent, 2002), p. 10.

⁵⁵ *Brave New World*, p. 42.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁸ Sean A. Witters, 'Words have to mean something more: Folkloric reading in *Brave New World*', in *Huxley's Brave New World: Essays*, ed. David Garrett Izzo and Kim Kirkpatrick (Jefferson: McFarland, 2008), p. 82.

⁵⁹ Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, 'Lusting Toward Utopia', p. 77.

⁶⁰ *The PowerBook*, p. 51.

the citizens in Huxley's dystopia are shielded from it. Clearly, protection from harm and unhappiness is not the defining feature of a utopia. Instead it appears that the freedom to experience pure human emotion, good or bad, is the true ideal.

Throughout this essay, often the ideals of sexuality found in *The PowerBook* and *Proud Man* can also be found in *BNW*. This highlights the thin line that lies between one man's utopia and another man's dystopia. Huxley's *BNW* operates as a 'warning against the very idea of Utopia itself'.⁶¹ By presenting the worst possible outcome of often well intentioned social changes, he warns of the dangers of social engineering, particularly through the manipulation of sexuality. Whilst we imagine the perfect world for humanity, Huxley reminds us to not lose sight of the very things that make us human in the process.

⁶¹ Nicholas Murray, Introduction in *Brave New World*, [1932] (London: Paperview/The Independent, 2002), p. 5.

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