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# Undergraduate Dissertation

“It’s personal”:  
Fighting the Abortion Stigma in Hillary Jordan’s  
*When She Woke*

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation analyzes the abortion stigma and its consequences in Hillary Jordan's *When She Woke*. The examination of the text from the perspective of the feminist dystopian genre within the novel's socio-cultural context of the early 2010s underlines the work's critical function. Besides, the exploration of the novel's dystopian world illustrates how the abortion stigma is created and sustained by patriarchal and religious structures. The text also shows how these oppressive entities that permeate the narrative may influence other minority groups and negatively impact women's mental health. Thus, women who have had an abortion may suffer social marginalization, discrimination, self-loathing, and shame, among other things. This dissertation demonstrates that literature—in particular, *When She Woke*—may become a powerful vehicle capable of encouraging women to resist and react against the established order.

**Keywords:** abortion stigma, feminist dystopia, patriarchy, religion, psyche, reform

## **Resumen**

Este trabajo explora el estigma del aborto y sus consecuencias en *When She Woke*, obra escrita por Hillary Jordan. El estudio de la obra desde la perspectiva del género distópico feminista dentro del contexto sociocultural de la novela a principios de la década de 2010 acentúa la función crítica de la novela. Además, el análisis del mundo distópico de la obra revela cómo el estigma del aborto es creado y sustentado por las estructuras patriarcales y religiosas. El texto también muestra cómo estas entidades opresivas que impregnan la narrativa pueden influir a otros grupos minoritarios y afectar negativamente la salud mental de las mujeres. Por ello, las mujeres que han abortado pueden sufrir marginalización social, discriminación, autodesprecio y vergüenza, entre otras cosas. Este trabajo demuestra que la literatura (específicamente, *When She Woke*) puede convertirse en un poderoso medio capaz de alentar a las mujeres a resistir y reaccionar contra el orden establecido.

**Palabras clave:** estigma del aborto, distopía feminista, patriarcado, religión, psique, reforma

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## Introduction

Hillary Jordan is an American author and screenwriter who spent fifteen years working as an advertising copywriter before starting her novelist career. In 2006, her novel *Mudbound* won the *Bellwether Prize*, an award for unpublished debut novels dealing with social justice issues (Jordan). In 2011, she wrote *When She Woke*, a feminist dystopian and re-visioning novel of Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

According to Rich, re-visions refer to “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (18). More specifically, feminist re-visionings underline the act of objecting and rebelling against the patriarchal structure, which is achieved by highlighting women's independence, their voice, and other methods employed to challenge the patriarchal framework (Wadhwa 1). In *When She Woke*, Hillary Jordan gives Hawthorne's masterpiece a new life, exploring and challenging the concerns about the abortion stigma that permeated US society at the time of its publication. In this case, the book recounts the abortion stigma Hannah Payne has to face after having an abortion in a futuristic society in which the termination of a pregnancy is illegal and punished with melachroming, an alteration of the skin color—in Hannah's case, to red—that underlines the person's criminalization and further perpetuates her social marginalization.

Since the analysis of a piece of literature is closely linked with its genre and the socio-cultural context in which the text is produced (Baccolini 519), the understanding of the abortion stigma under *When She Woke's* context and genre is crucial. Besides, comprehending that the legal status of abortion in 2011—*When She Woke's* publication date—is the result of decades of hard work and previous efforts is also important. It is

necessary, then, to bear in mind that abortion went from its criminalization at the end of the nineteenth century (Ziegler 2) to the demand for the elimination of restrictions in the late 1960s (4), to its ultimate legalization in the *Roe v. Wade* case in 1973. The decision taken by the Supreme Court in this court case would change the perception of abortion in politics and society, stepping forward toward the destigmatization of abortion in the United States. This decision meant the recognition of a “right of personal privacy” (Supreme Court of the US 152), which was considered to be “broad enough to encompass a woman’s decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy” (153), but subject to some limitations.

Despite the legal state of abortion in 2011, debates about the morality of the same still permeated US society. When the novel was written, Barack Obama was the president of the United States (2009-2017), and one of his deeds was establishing the Affordable Care Act (2010), a healthcare reform that became controversial regarding the abortion discussion. On the one hand, liberals advocated for a universal healthcare system, trying to implement regulations to avoid exploitation in healthcare insurance, and sharing their sympathy for women in need of abortion or contraception. On the other hand, conservatives promoted a sense of personal responsibility in attaining insurance, encouraging strict policies on women seeking to terminate pregnancies (Oussama 53). Thus, abortion rights were not universally accepted at the time and many people sought to change the course of the legalization of abortion in the United States.

This constant argument about the morality of abortion —which inevitably concerns women’s reproductive and sexual rights— might have led Hillary Jordan to reflect upon what the future might hold for women and how society could adapt to that situation. For that reason, *When She Woke* fits into the speculative fiction genre, which hypothesizes about the future’s possible upbringing and how society might react,

bearing in mind the social issues that permeate the author's reality in terms of gender, race, sexuality, etc. (Morgan 2). Indeed, Hillary Jordan seems to have sensed the coming of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* when she wrote that "Utah became the nexus of the conservative backlash ('The Rectification') that led to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*" (Jordan 36). Therefore, the creation of a dystopian society in *When She Woke* results from the uncertainty regarding the abortion discussion in the author's reality.

Moreover, throughout history, women who have wished or sought the termination of pregnancy have experienced different degrees of stigma (Hanschmidt et al. 176). The abortion stigma may be defined as a derogatory label marking women who wish to end a pregnancy, suggesting their insufficiency in terms of societal conventions of femininity, whether in their own perception or the eyes of society (Kumar et al. 4). It may surface in various forms and through different spheres—such as literature— influencing people's stands on social issues. Hillary Jordan was interested in analyzing and depicting the emotions brought about by societal stigma, and was inspired by her uncle, who expressed that "all drugs should be legal. They just ought to turn you bright blue" ("When She Woke," 00:01:25 - 00:01:39). The novel portrays not only the physical discrimination against Hannah—melachroming her skin to red— but also the psychological one—society's abortion stigma.

The literary sphere, then, becomes a compelling device by giving visibility, influencing, and shaping—both positively and negatively—the construction and understanding of abortion in society. Therefore, the positive representation of abortion may play a relevant role in its destigmatization by criticizing the abortion stigma, portraying its consequences, and its normalization. Bearing in mind the idea of the importance of the literary sphere as a compelling vehicle capable of encouraging social activism, the purpose of this dissertation is to analyze *When She Woke*, exploring how

the novel may contribute to the normalization of abortion and the criticism of its stigmatization in society. Thus, this study explores and analyzes the underlying patriarchal and religious forces that perpetuate the abortion stigma, shaping individuals' understanding of the issue and negatively affecting women's psyches.

In order to analyze the oppressive forces that encourage the abortion stigma in *When She Woke*, I have divided the dissertation into three chapters. The first chapter will focus on the novel as a re-visioning of *The Scarlet Letter* and the importance of the feminist dystopian fiction genre in establishing the novel's critical component. The second chapter will center on the groups affected by the abortion stigma and the analysis of the religious and social groups responsible for the prejudices surrounding Hannah's choice to terminate her pregnancy. The third and last chapter will consider the effects that living in a society that stigmatizes abortion may have on women.

### **Chapter One: *When She Woke* as Re-visioning and Feminist Dystopia**

As previously mentioned, *When She Woke* is a re-telling of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Hillary Jordan employs some elements that connect to Hawthorne's masterpiece to explore the tensions surrounding the abortion debate in the United States. One of the most obvious parallels with *The Scarlet Letter* may be found in *When She Woke*'s chapters, whose titles are meticulously chosen to glimpse at the original story it nourishes from and to further explore the novel's central theme—the abortion stigma. Thus, the first chapter is called “The Scaffold,” a clear reference to the beginning of Hawthorne's classic. Here, Hester Prynne stands on the scaffold about to be publicly shamed for being adulterous and sentenced to carry a scarlet letter A until the day of her death. Similarly, *When She Woke*'s first chapter narrates the story of Hannah Payne—whose name reminds the reader of the original Hester Prynne—, a

twenty-six-year-old woman who awakens in the Texas Chrome Ward with her skin turned to red after undergoing an abortion in a dystopian society where terminating a pregnancy is illegal and punished with melachroming—an alteration of skin color. The trial and the prison ward symbolize Hannah's scaffold and, there, she grapples with rejection, self-loathing, guilt, and an identity crisis.

The next chapter of Jordan's novel is entitled "Penitence," which relates to *The Scarlet Letter* due to the similar situation both protagonists find themselves in. In both cases, they are punished and marginalized by society, enduring psychological torment and self-reproach. In *When She Woke*, after serving a month in prison, Hannah is taken by her father to the Straight Path Center, where she experiences guilt and shame until she decides to escape. In relation to the previous chapter, "The Magic Circle," delves into Hannah's journey after leaving the Straight Path Center. She encounters rejection and discrimination from society, which is what Hester Prynne's magic circle symbolizes as well. This chapter shows Hannah and her friend Kayla's encounter with the Novembrists: a feminist group dedicated to aiding women in need. Together, they devise a plan to leave the oppressive United States and reverse the melachroming process while starting anew in a freer country—Canada.

The fourth—"The Wilderness"—and fifth—"Transfiguration"—chapters are related, as they recount Kayla and Hannah's journey through unknown places and situations that leads them to change and self-discovery. Similarly, *The Scarlet Letter* illustrates Hester's isolation in the wilderness due to society's discrimination. Besides, Jordan's novel shows how, even though Hannah and Kayla are unaware of the threatening position they find themselves in due to the upcoming treason from one of the Novembrists, they eventually have a successful escape. In this situation, Hannah's journey goes from self-hatred, remorse, and self-punishment to self-discovery,

acceptance, and forgiveness. Thus, there is a transfiguration—which symbolizes change in *The Scarlet Letter*—as she learns to love herself again and to prioritize her own well-being in a world that has failed to secure women’s reproductive and sexual rights.

Besides, due to the hopeless representation of a futuristic society and the use of technology and science to perpetuate the violation of women’s reproductive and sexual rights, *When She Woke* falls under the category of feminist dystopia and science fiction. Mahida argues that the first writers of dystopian literature in the nineteenth century glimpsed at an apocalyptic society that would mean the end of the world in the hands of men and technological developments (2). According to Booker, this genre would feel natural for feminist authors, as one of the main tensions is normally the conflict between men and women, and dystopian governments usually control sexuality as a way of exerting power over women (334). In the case of *When She Woke*, the totalitarian regime that controls US society has restrictive and criminalizing laws and policies—such as the illegalization of abortion, or the melachroming process—that promote women’s inferior position and lack of freedom. The representation of repressing governments that control individuals’ language and bodily autonomy reminds the reader of the impact they have on women’s bodies, not only in the dystopian world but also in the real one (Bromage 15). In *When She Woke*, the reader gets a sense of closeness—even though it is supposed to be set in the future—as many of the issues mentioned in the story are currently happening to millions of citizens in the United States.

To observe the similarities between *When She Woke*’s dystopian reality and the reality outside fiction, we may look at some of the characteristics of almost every dystopian novel:

Firstly, there usually is a background that aims at justifying the socio-cultural changes in the dystopian world (Mahida 2). *When She Woke* centers around a futuristic, totalitarian, and theocratic society in which a pandemic —colloquially called the superclap pandemic— known as the “Great Scourge” has disabled a large number of women from bearing children, decreasing the birthrate in the country. Thus, the government of the fictional world leans on this idea to maintain its control over women’s reproductive and sexual rights. For instance, the illegalization of abortion and the following punishment for those who do not submit to the established laws deprive women of their individual freedom and bodily autonomy, perpetuating women’s inferiority over men.

Secondly, most of the time, the dystopian society is filled with technological and scientific innovations (Mahida 2). *When She Woke* presents a society where technological and scientific developments are central to the main character’s reality, connecting the text with the science fiction genre. Mahida describes the science fiction world as a reality in which “the impact of science and technology on mankind is a major theme” (1). Hillary Jordan portrayed technological and scientific innovations as a vehicle to exploit and take control over women’s reproductive and sexual rights. The book’s first line gives a glimpse of this idea: “WHEN SHE WOKE, SHE WAS RED” (Jordan 3). As the story unfolds, the third-person, heterodiegetic narrator explains why her skin color has changed to red: the melachroming process. This process consists of injecting a virus that turns one’s skin to a specific color depending on the degree of the crime committed. Hannah Payne has been accused of murder because she has had an abortion. Therefore, the employment of the science fiction genre —with the scientific and technological advances— helps in the construction of the abortion stigma in a society that understands abortion as actual murder, encouraging the violation of

women's reproductive and sexual rights. Besides, the prison cell Hannah has to stay in is filled with cameras broadcasting the prisoners' cells as if they were in a reality show, placing society in a higher position of knowledge and morality and perpetuating the prisoners' inferiority—in the case of Hannah, due to the termination of her pregnancy.

In the eyes of feminist science fiction, the genre analyzes the oppression exerted by twentieth-century patriarchy in unreal settings that aim at the recontextualization of issues that affect our society—such as the alienation of women and the patriarchal injustices— from a fresh perspective (Wadhwa 2). *When She Woke* illustrates these characteristics by portraying the tensions surrounding the author's context with regard to the abortion debate in the United States.

Lastly, the dystopian novel presents a protagonist who does not subjugate to the established system (Mahida 2), which could be connected to the contemporary feminist dystopian genre, whose aim is “to transcend the boundaries of fiction and engage in global activism” (Martínez-Falquina 4). *When She Woke* acts as a vehicle to criticize the social discussions about the termination of a pregnancy that impregnated Hillary Jordan's world in 2011. In the text, the female protagonist learns along the way not to conform to what one has been taught. Thus, the reader learns that “even when they'd injected her, there hadn't been a shred of doubt in her mind that she deserved her punishment. But now, she found herself questioning the system's fairness” (Jordan 209). This quotation represents the beginning of Hannah's doubts about society and its morality. Her journey of self-discovery will be more noticeable once she forgives herself. When she finally understands the world as “an unforgiving place” (230), she says to herself: “*I have to forgive myself*” (230), a glimpse of self-love that does not appear much in the first part of the novel.

While walking through the shadows of her psyche, she learns to leave behind her inherent prejudices about abortion, freeing herself from the oppressive forms that constantly punish her for the termination of her pregnancy. This way she breaks the handcuffs that imprison her, and finally understands the importance of reform and activism in society: “It’s personal. Hannah fully grasped, for the first time, the meaning of the words. They weren’t just about choice or even the right to privacy; they were a declaration of self-worth, a demand for personal dignity” (Jordan 279). She starts seeing herself as a person again and decides to abandon her worst companions during the journey: shame and regret (329), which eventually leads to self-discovery and the recovery of her sense of identity: “She woke, and she was herself” (341). Thus, the narrative fits into the social activism characteristic of the dystopian genre, and through her novel Hillary Jordan encourages women to wake up and react against injustices.

## **Chapter Two: the Perpetuation of the Abortion Stigma**

*When She Woke* presents a society in which oppressive structures are in control of women’s reproductive and sexual rights, dictating what is accepted as morally correct. Before delving into the exploration of these oppressive forces, the groups affected by the abortion stigma need to be analyzed. The novel employs two major groups of people as vehicles to portray the consequences of the perpetuation of abortion prejudices.

On the one hand, the text presents many women who have been or are affected by stigmatization after the termination of their pregnancies. The female character whose stigma is thoroughly analyzed is the protagonist. From the very beginning of the book, Hannah experiences judgment and isolation as a form of punishment for what society considers to be murder. Indeed, in the eyes of the law, societal structures, and religion, she has defied the system and erred against God’s will. For that reason, she —and many

other women in the novel— will have to deal with a sentence of rejection and abuse as a way of self-reflecting upon what is considered a “sin.”

Additionally, according to Norris et al., the abortion stigma may have an impact not only on women who have had abortions —although it is the most affected group— but also on people associated with them (49). Following this idea, the narrative presents the judgment experienced by several characters in favor of abortion who are associated with Hannah. For instance, the Novembrists are a group of feminists against opponents of choice and in charge of helping women in need, spreading their motto “It is personal” (Jordan 201). As the story unfolds, the reader learns that society is against feminists, whom they consider to be “unnatural women who sought to overturn the order laid down by God [...] and pervert the American way of life” (206-7).

Moreover, the reader discovers that Hannah’s obstetrician-gynecologist, Raphael—who performed Hannah’s abortion— belongs to this group and feels discriminated against and unjustly treated by society. Thus, the narrator states:

Even more abhorrent to him than the lack of exceptions for rape, incest or the mother’s health was the abrogation of doctor-patient privilege. Legally, he was bound to notify the police if he found evidence that a patient had had a recent abortion; morally, he felt bound not to. [...] When he got caught falsifying the results of pelvic examinations, the state took away his medical license, and he left Salt Lake City of Dallas (Jordan 36).

The quotation uncovers Raphael’s unconformity with the lack of freedom individuals have in decision-making due to the system's unfairness.

Once the individuals affected by the abortion stigma have been presented, an exploration of the different groups that condemn the practice is due. The novel revolves around the different forms of punishment Hannah faces after her abortion. These forms

of punishment are a result of a set of universal ideas constructed by the dystopian patriarchal and theocratic society, which shapes and influences the way individuals understand the morality of abortion.

The largest entities that help in the construction and perpetuation of the stigmatization of abortion in the text are religion and society. At the very beginning of the story, the reader acknowledges —through several analepses— that Hannah has been sentenced by a judge “to undergo melachroming by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, to spend thirty days in the Chrome ward of the Crawford State Prison and to remain a Red for a period of sixteen years” (Jordan 12). Kumar et al. claim that governmental structures may have a great impact on the construction of the judgment surrounding abortion (631). Therefore, Hannah’s first punishment by societal forces is the pigmentation of her skin color to red. The choice of red as the color injected into her skin is no coincidence, as red is usually connected with blood, murder, and womanhood. For that reason, her skin color becomes a symbol of her sin, which reinforces patriarchal notions of abortion, seen by society as a crime and as something to be ashamed of.

In connection to the political sphere, the narrative’s dystopian society is highly influenced by religious values. Thus, Hannah’s sentence is not a result of mere social and political justice, but also a result of religious justice. In Hannah’s reality, abortion is seen by religion as a sin that needs to be forgiven by God. This explains why Aidan —Hannah’s pastor and secret lover— is given a high position in Hannah’s sentence, intervening and imploring her to name the father and the man who performed the abortion in order to save herself from disgrace and hell for the crime committed in the eyes of God (Jordan 10-11).

Hannah's journey through judgment and isolation continues after she has served one month in prison. The protagonist's father picks her up and takes her to the Straight Path Center, whose door has an engraved message:

I will bring the blind by a way they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known; I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things I will do unto them, and not forsake them. —Isaiah 42:16.

(Jordan 79)

This perfectly depicts the purpose of the Straight Path Center, a place that promises to change “wicked” people and help them find their way to God again —exactly what society expects of Hannah. Thus, it symbolizes repentance and God's path to salvation after her “terrible sin,” and the protagonist sees it as a way of compensating society and God for her “crime.” These ideas further reinforce her marginalization and rejection as a form of punishment and society's belief that Hannah has to feel regret and shame for what she has done. In connection, Hannah has to follow the motto of the center, which is no less than “penitence, atonement, truth, and humility” (89) to save herself from her circumstances.

On her arrival, she also notices a painting of Mary Magdalene, commonly seen as a prostitute and a repentant figure (Zanayed 64). The novel mentions that Jesus Christ saved her from her demons (Jordan 80), making a clear connection between Hannah and Mary Magdalene, understood as a symbol of Hannah's persona —an outcast who has given herself to Satan (143). As Hannah manages to get along in the Straight Path Center, she continues to be condemned for the termination of her pregnancy. For example, in the path for salvation offered by the Henleys —a married couple in charge of the center—, a set of denigrating sessions are given to Red Chromes. These sessions

—known as the Enlightenment sessions— are meant to publicly humiliate those women who have terminated a pregnancy. For Hannah:

Enlightenment was the worst [...] She never knew what to expect: a lecture from a visiting doctor on the gory specifics of the procedure, complete with jars of fetuses in formaldehyde; an ‘ideation session’ where they had to imagine alternate futures for their aborted babies trying to crawl out of their mothers’ wombs. But the worst were the survivors who came in person: a teenage girl whose arm had been ripped off when her mother tried to abort her at twenty-six weeks; a man who’d suffered from cerebral palsy and crippling depression all his life, only to learn in his forties that his twin brother had been aborted, and his own brain had been perforated during the procedure. (133-34)

Consequently, these sessions become a symbol of psychological torture for the protagonist and her partners.

In connection with the previous idea, Hannah learns in these sessions that each Red Walker is forced to make a personalized doll that symbolizes their unborn children. When she sees them, the enlightener says: “Look upon them, Walker. For to look upon them is to look at your own sin” (Jordan 111). The image of the dolls serves as a means to explore the mental abuse Hannah and the Red Walkers have to go through, as societal and religious forces oblige them to acknowledge their abortions as murder and sin.

Besides, when Hannah tries to explain in one of the Enlightenment sessions that she had an abortion because she was afraid, all she receives from the enlightener is judgment and lack of compassion:

When you defiled your body with fornication and then abortion, you defiled God. When you stole the life of your innocent child, you stole what was God’s. Every time a woman’s weakness leads her to defy God’s commandments, Satan laughs.

[...] Could you hear him, Walker, when you spread your legs for the man who impregnated you, and when you spread them again for the butcher who scraped your precious child from your womb? Could you feel God's wrath raining down on you? (Jordan 113-14)

The enlightener's words perfectly represent the ideology of the world Hannah lives in, in which abortion is closely connected with Satan, murder, and promiscuity. The elaboration of such harmful messages contributes to the creation of the negative image of abortion, which is passed on from individual to individual.

Moreover, after seeing the Walkers' dolls, Hannah is also forced to make one in the image of her unborn child. In the process of making the doll, she is asked to follow some conditions: to name it and to pay special attention to detail in the creation of the lost creature that will never see the world and all of God's creations (Jordan 114). In their continuous torment, Hannah and the rest of the Red Walkers have to delve into their most intimate and personal memories, punishing themselves for what society considers immoral. In the sessions, they start voicing their sin and the name of their unborn child one by one: "This is my baby girl, Aisha. Her father raped me, but it wasn't her fault. She was innocent and I murdered her. Forgive me, Aisha" (112). This form of punishment creates the impression that, even in the worst scenarios, they were wicked and acted against God's will. Besides, the mental torture and degradation become even more notorious when Hannah is asked to recreate the moment of the abortion. These questions illustrate Mrs. Henley's pious intention toward Hannah:

How long did it take? Was there a great deal of pain? Did you see the aborted fetus afterward? How did your parents react? What was it like to wake up in the Chrome ward and see yourself for the first time? Did you imagine people you knew sitting at home watching you? (126)

The interrogation humiliates Hannah and provokes such discomfort that she leaves the room on the edge of a mental breakdown.

However, punishment does not end there. When one of the Red Walkers —Anne-Marie— is departing from the center, she is forced to leave her doll —her daughter, as the enlighteners make them think— behind, further accentuating the mental abuse they have to suffer. As Anne-Marie resists giving her up, the enlightener tears the doll apart, triggering unimaginable sadness which is answered by a cold-hearted sentence: “That is how God feels when you abort one of His beloved children” (Jordan 141). This type of action makes Hannah and her partners suffer again for the “loss” of their children, reinforcing the center’s belief that they have to suffer and repent.

In connection to the previous ideas, another factor that contributes to abortion stigma is the closer community or the stigmatized woman’s surroundings —her family, her work, her friends, and the internet— which are also influenced by the patriarchal and theocratic forces that permeate *When She Woke*’s dystopian world. Throughout the novel, Hannah is constantly reminded of the disgrace and dishonor she has brought to her family when deciding to abort. Thus, her mother becomes one of her major reminders of the guilt and regret she should be feeling, continually bringing her down. As an example, when she visits Hannah before her sentencing, she tells her that she has no compassion for her, as she did not have any compassion for her unborn child either (Jordan 23). In addition, she is constantly harassing her with harmful messages. Comments such as “I don’t know you. [...] I have one daughter, and her name is Rebecca” (25) nourish her sense of alienation, and negatively impact her mental health with feelings of guilt and shame.

Related to her family, her sister’s husband avoids her presence and encourages his wife to ignore and punish Hannah with indifference, saying that “some things don’t

deserve to be forgiven” (Jordan 158). Not only does Rebecca’s husband encourage Hannah’s family to marginalize her, but he also belongs to a group known as The Fist of Christ, which persecutes and kills people like her (155), creating the impression that women who terminate a pregnancy deserve suffering and death.

Furthermore, Hannah experiences rejection to the extent of losing her job as a professional seamstress, when she receives a letter from work informing her that her services are no longer needed after the abortion (Jordan 166). She also receives threatening messages from unknown individuals, harassing her with emails such as “BURN IN HELL, MURDERER!” (165) or “I hope you hear the cries of the baby you killed every night for the rest of your life” (165). She feels like an outcast and knows that society sees her with anger, abhorrence, and distress (178), becoming the ultimate image of marginalization, sin, and repentance in the eyes of society.

Finally, language and discourse also become one of the greatest perpetrators of the stigmatization of abortion. According to Kumar et al., language used by the religious, political, medical, and social spheres frame and construct the negative connotations of abortion (630). The narrative shows how political, educational, and social discourses aim to create submissive women. If women are subordinated and they do not see where the problem lies, there is no possibility of rebelling. Thus, society may take control of women’s rights. For instance, Hannah has received an education based on the belief that women’s main purpose in life is to have children and be a good wife. Such ideology becomes difficult to erase and nourish the abortion stigma in society —because who would want to abort if a woman’s only purpose in life is having children?

Additionally, the novel’s major groups against abortion constantly use words that stand in the way of the normalization and acceptance of abortion. For example, the use of the word “murder” instead of “abortion” gives the procedure a new meaning in

Hannah's world. If societal structures regard abortion as murder, they have an excuse to perpetuate hatred and punishment toward those women who decide to end their pregnancies. Besides, when Hannah is in the Straight Path Center trying to explain her fear of having kept her unborn child, the enlightener sermons her and uses the word "butcher" (Jordan 114) to refer to the man who performed her abortion. Employing these types of words creates the impression that abortions are gory and bloody. This defamiliarization helps to distance the act from something human and connects, instead, with animals and the wilderness. Thus, the constant use of words such as "shame," "repentance," "crime," "sin," "wickedness," "guilt" or "Satan" in connection with abortion associates the termination of a pregnancy with negative qualities and emotions, making its stigmatization possible.

### **Chapter Three: The Effects of the Abortion Stigma on Women**

The prejudices surrounding abortion in *When She Woke* negatively affect the protagonist and other women in a similar situation. Hannah has grown up in a society that has told her and every woman that abortion is a crime and Satan-related. This explains why, after noticing the rejection of abortion in society, she decides to keep her pregnancy and the abortion to herself, not even confiding in her own family and the father of the baby. The narrator tells us how she did everything by herself, knowing that her family would not accept her decision: "She almost hadn't gone through with it. She's taken the pregnancy test at just over six weeks, after her second missed period, and then agonized for another month before screwing up the courage to act" (Jordan 27).

However, secrecy evokes negative feelings in the protagonist, such as internalized shame and guilt. Hannah mentions mid-story that ever since she had the abortion, shame had accompanied her in silence (Jordan 139). Certainly, the reader constantly notices

her little self-love and her inability to forgive herself, always in connection with guilt and shame due to her abortion. For instance, Hannah accepts God's abandonment, as she thinks that "God, if He existed, didn't answer the prayers of the faithless or the damned" (238) and that it is her fault (9) because she committed a sin that deserved punishment (209).

In addition, she cannot forgive herself and constantly expresses it: "*I was sorry, I am sorry, I will be sorry, with no hope of a future perfect, an I will have been sorry*" (Jordan 73). She is in a psychological battle that does not allow her to forgive herself and cope with what she has done. However, even though she does not think she is worthy of her family's forgiveness, she incessantly asks for it: "I'm sorry, daddy. [...]" She had said those words so many times—to him, to Becca, to her mother, to the ghost of her child, to God—knowing they weren't enough and never would be; knowing she'd feel compelled to keep saying them over and over again even so" (72).

Furthermore, the situation causes her such sadness that she even doubts her wanting to continue living: "Something like ninety percent committed suicide within a month of their release. The message of the numbers was unambiguous: if you were depressed enough to sleep despite the lights, you were as good as dead. Hannah couldn't sleep. She didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed" (Jordan 6). Her not knowing whether to be relieved or not reflects her miserable condition, which, eventually, makes her understand the impossibility of forgiveness:

With every day that passed Hannah felt more and more desolate, like an abandoned house falling into ruin, cold wind whistling through the chinks. Finally, the day she was sentenced and taken to the Chrome ward, she acknowledged the inescapable truth: there would be no forgiveness or mercy for her, no going back to Him. How could there be, after what she'd done? (73)

This perfectly portrays her desperate condition, which intertwines with a desire to condemn herself as a result of guilt.

In connection with the last idea, the wish for self-punishment is constantly depicted in the narrative. For example, when she is about to have the abortion, she has a conversation with the doctor regarding whether or not she would want to know the steps of the procedure, which Hannah accepts as a way of doing justice for the baby (Jordan 32). Then, the doctor informs her that she will feel pain during and after the procedure and what Hannah feels is that “she wanted it to hurt” (33) because “it seemed unconscionable to her, to take a life and not feel pain” (33). This highlights the idea that having committed a “crime,” she deserves pain and punishment. Besides, she has a sense of insufficiency, forcing herself to prove to the world her repentance. She expresses these feelings as follows: “She’d let down so many people: her family and friends, her employers, Aidan. And now, the Henleys, who’d been kind enough to take her in and offer her this chance at redemption. A chance she was proving unworthy of” (110). Thus, when she leaves the Straight Path Center, her feeling of inadequacy increases, and the first thing that comes to her mind is to keep it a secret from her family, not wanting to shame them any more than she already has (110).

The mental distress experienced by the protagonist may also be reflected in the use of specific stylistic devices in the novel. Hannah’s new life is filled with intrusive thoughts, which are a result of her self-reflection and marginalization. Her inability to talk about her feelings with other people after her abortion provokes harmful thoughts that serve as a means to remind herself of what she has done as a way of “justice” for her unborn baby. She has no one but herself, which leads her to deal with the situation in the only way she knows —how society has taught her to react— by punishing and

self-tormenting herself psychologically with words such as “I committed adultery with a man of God. I murdered her unborn grandchild” (Jordan 93).

Moreover, Hannah seems to have automatized sentences that she continually repeats, which helps her keep her mind on earth. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, she tells herself that she is “Hannah Elizabeth Payne. Daughter of John and Samantha. Sister of Rebecca. Killer of a child, unnamed” (Jordan 7). It almost seems as if she has to remember ordinary aspects of her life to maintain her essence and avoid madness, which is inevitably connected to the situation of mental anxiety provoked by society’s judgment and constant punishment after the transpired events.

In addition, as a result of her deteriorated mental health, Hannah seems to have difficulties in finding her sense of self. She tries to identify with the new Hannah and her memories of the old Hannah, but she finds it impossible. When she has just turned red, the narrator says “She saw a red face —hers. Red arms and legs —hers” (Jordan 4), reinforcing her sense of alienation from her body through the repetition of “hers.” She feels no one can recognize her after the abortion, not even herself. Even if she cannot find her essence in her new body, Hannah is certain that the person she was before is an alien to her. Thus, she says that her memories feel “quaint” and “unreal” (7). Therefore, society not only punishes her, but also gets hold of her identity, leaving her nothing but shame, guilt, and regret.

Furthermore, her mental rupture is also shaped in the form of nightmares, which might suggest the existence of trauma, resulting from the culpability she carries along the narrative. One of her nightmares reflects the trauma caused by her abortion and the consequences it has brought her:

The deeper she dug, the wetter and denser the sand and the harder it was for her fingers to penetrate it. [...] The sand was very wet now and dark, and her fingers

were raw. The moat started to fill with water from below, welling up over her hands to her wrists. She smelled something fetid and realized it wasn't water but blood, dark[...] and viscous with age. She tried to jerk her hands out of the moat, but they were caught on something —no, something was holding them, pulling them down. [...] Hannah was pulled under. 'Kiss the baby for me,' Becca said. 'Tell it—' Hannah couldn't hear the rest. Her wars were full of blood. (Jordan 5)

Hannah wakes up agitated and in a cold sweat, and she has to remind herself that what covers her is "*just sweat. Not blood, sweat*" (5), underlining the psychological burden of the protagonist.

Nevertheless, Hannah is not the only woman who suffers from psychological torment. When Hannah meets the rest of the Red Walkers, she sees that "one woman was rocking the doll in her arms, crooning to it; another was bouncing hers on her knee; a third was holding hers facedown on her shoulder and patting its back as though burping it" (Jordan 111). The mental instability portrayed in these lines submerges the protagonist in uncertainty about the condition of the Walkers. Moreover, the Enlightenment sessions also unravel the mental abuses the Red Walkers receive in the center. In one of them, Hannah hears one say: "Here is my HEAD, and here is my NOSE. Here are my FINGERS and here are my TOES. [...] Here is my [...] Shh, shh. Don't cry, baby, please don't cry. Mama's here" (112). This reveals the deterioration of some of the Walkers's psyches as a result of societal and religious punishment.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this dissertation was to provide an insightful analysis of the abortion stigma as represented in *When She Woke*'s dystopian society. The study focused on how

specific structures encourage the perpetuation of abortion prejudices and on the inevitable impact on women's identities and reproductive rights.

*When She Woke*'s patriarchal and religious forces become the main antagonists of the novel, condemning the protagonist—and, for that matter, any woman who has an abortion—and creating a tone of shame, guilt, isolation, and self-loathing. The examination of these oppressive structures and the dehumanizing discourse employed by them reveals how deeply inherent the prejudices about abortion are in society. In the text, abortion is always compared to murder, sin, promiscuity, and the devil, which facilitates the sustenance of the abortion stigma in the novel. Besides, the novel shows how these patriarchal and religious structures may influence other groups—such as family, the workplace, and the internet—and encourage them to reject the protagonist and any individual supporting or simply related to Hannah.

*When She Woke* also illustrates the complexities of the abortion stigma and how women who challenge and stand against the established system have to battle against prejudice, torture, and repudiation. Some of the effects faced by women due to the propagation of abortion prejudices are shame, trauma, depression, self-hatred, identity problems, a constant feeling of guilt, and mental instability. Besides, the work demonstrates how abortion stigma affects not only their psyches but also their life experiences.

Besides, the novel illustrates how fiction can transcend its pages and reflect relevant issues worldwide. We cannot avoid drawing parallels between *When She Woke*'s dystopian society and the current situation of reproductive rights in the United States. The decision taken by the Supreme Court in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) overturned the right to have an abortion, returning the power to decide about the termination of a pregnancy to each state's government (3). The

Guttmacher Institute shows that, nowadays, abortion is banned in fourteen states—in some occasions, with exceptions—and in thirty-six states abortion is legal—in many of them with gestational limits that vary from state to state (“Interactive Map: US Abortion Policies and Access After Roe”). This relates to the situation depicted in the novel, in which abortion has also been illegalized. For that reason, the text serves as a cautionary tale, as it warns the reader of the possible outcome the constant debate about the morality of abortion may have and reminds the reader of the long-lasting fight for women’s sexual and reproductive rights.

Ultimately, the narrative underlines literature’s power to call for action by giving visibility to the psychological consequences of the abortion stigma on women. The depiction of a protagonist who does not surrender before adversities in the text aims to encourage women to question, resist, and fight back against the structures that try to violate their human rights, freedom, and bodily autonomy. It demonstrates that women’s sexual and reproductive rights are not guaranteed in our society. For that reason, the narrative expresses the urgent need for change and action and asks to work toward a more equitable society where women’s rights are secured and upheld.

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