



# Examining Humanity in Bernard Beckett's *Genesis*: Anaximander, Plato, Classical Philosophy and Gothic in Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults

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New Zealand author Bernard Beckett's young adult novel *Genesis* (2006) blends classical philosophy and Gothic tropes in a dystopian novel about the nature and ends of humanity. It is a curious work, presented in the form of philosophical dialogue and set in a future world known as The Republic, in which robots have triumphed over humanity and formed a new society based on rational order. Yet sinister underpinnings to their society and their emotional origin-story, which forms the core of this novel, show both that their rational world order is built on lies, deception, and murder, and that the human soul is harder to be rid of than they imagine. The clash between robots and humans is depicted as a clash between reason and passion, and also a clash between a classical calm (seen in the Republic's emphasis on classical philosophy) and the Gothic turbulence associated with the dark, but emotional, side of humanity. *Genesis* is a compelling reflection on the nature of the human soul, aimed at young readers. This paper will trace how that reflection plays out through Beckett's use of classical and Gothic ideals in an unusually thought-provoking dystopian work for young readers.

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To summarize the plot: *Genesis* is set far in the future, on the island of Aotearoa (the Māori name for New Zealand). Its protagonist, a bright and ambitious student, named Anaximander, is being interviewed for admission into a prestigious Academy. It is the elite institution of her society, which is known as The Republic. The Republic, we gradually discover, is post-human. Its citizens, including Anaximander, are artificially intelligent beings, robots proud to have overcome their original creators, the humans. They are also vigilant in eliminating any lurking remnants of humanity, i.e., “mutant” robots infected by the virus of the human soul. Chillingly, they do so by deception – luring intelligent mutants to “examination” for entrance into the Academy. In the final stages of the novel, Anaximander, who believed she had been excelling, discovers that there is no Academy. Instead, she has been selected because she is a mutant. Anaximander is put to death, her head disconnected from her body by her tutor, Pericles.

Like the rest of her society, Anaximander is a robot. Her special examination subject is a man from the last days of humanity: a human soldier turned rebel leader, Adam Forde (2058–77), who spent the end of his life in captivity. He was punished for his rebellion by being used to test a new form of artificial intelligence, the prototype robot named Art. The records from this testing give Anaximander much of her material to present Adam’s debates with Art as a holographic animation. We discover that Adam persuades Art to escape, but when soldiers surround the pair, Adam asks Art to kill him. This Art does, and before he is captured, he downloads his program into the computer matrix, enabling the development of an AI society which takes over from humanity. Or at least, so the official story goes. Later, we discover that Art planned to kill Adam and that the robot take-over was a violent, premeditated attack. We also discover that Adam has not gone quietly. In the final moments of his life, when he is killed by Art, he looks into the robot’s eyes and transmits aspects of his soul into Art’s operating system. When Art later downloads his program into the system, he downloads Adam’s soul as well. The Examiners refer to Adam’s soul as a virus in the system, and those who are infected by him as mutants, as Pericles explains:

It is my job to find potential mutants and prepare them for the examination. They have not been examining your suitability for The Academy, Anaximander. The Academy accepts no new members.<sup>1</sup>

1 Beckett, *Genesis*, 143.

As Pericles kills Anaximander, removing her head from her body, he is carrying out what he believes to be a necessary task to keep his society safe. It is also a secret task, for most citizens of The Republic only know about the false version of their society's origins. Few of them are interested enough in the figure of Adam Forde to find out more. Those who do, like Anaximander, are judged to be mutants, to be infected by the virus that Adam has passed to Art. That virus – of individuality, of power, of non-conformity, of free-thought, of hate, of love – of the soul, or spirit, or essence of *humanity*, is what the Examiners eradicate on behalf of their AI society and is the subject at the core of the novel.

Subtexts and ironies abound in *Genesis*: here, we have a novel about beginnings and endings – the ending of Anaximander's life comes as she discovers the truth about her society's origins (and its original sin). Instead of being a peaceful, rational society, The Republic originated in violent destruction, when the robots slaughtered humans and took their place. Leaders of The Republic present their society as sinless – and therefore peaceful and rational – and do so through a false origin myth, in which Art peacefully overcomes Adam and downloads his program into the system, enabling the robots to rise and overcome the profoundly flawed humanity. The Examiners tell Anaximander this lie is necessary: "So long as you do not know the evil you are capable of, there is a good chance you will never embrace it."<sup>2</sup> However, as Anaximander discovers, The Republic is based on something worse than a lie: namely, the systematic elimination of any robot who has inherited human traits (or souls). In short, a horrific genocide. The novel closes on a moment of horror, as Anaximander's head is disconnected from her body. But as it is, she looks deep into her tutor's eyes, believing she sees in them sorrow and compassion. Perhaps in doing so, she infects him with her soul (for the soul and compassion seem to be transmitted by looks), suggesting that humanity will continue to survive.

The plot of *Genesis* is deliberately puzzling: it unfolds through a pair of nested narratives, moving backward and forward through time (the present of Anaximander's examination and the past of Adam's actions, inquisition, escape, and death). The narratives are presented as a series of dialogues, the truth and its interpretation are contested, and meaning is continually shifting and uncertain. Many plot elements take time to become clear, with delayed moments of realization a crucial part of Beckett's narrative approach. With *Ge-*

2 Ibid., 142.

*nesis*, Beckett presents his readers with a puzzle. He claims it has friendly intentions, that it is merely “about the things that puzzle me, as my books are in the end. I hope it puzzles you too, in a friendly sort of way.”<sup>3</sup> Packing a great many puzzles into its 144 pages, *Genesis* pushes us to think hard about what it means to be human – in particular what it means to feel, to dream, and to have a soul.

In their discussions, Anaximander, Adam, and Art discuss whether humanity is beautiful or whether it contains the seeds of monstrosity. What is a thought? What is the soul? Is the word soul simply another word for ideas and thought? Where do actions come from? From impulse or thought? From feeling or reason? Does Adam’s violence come from instinct or passion? Does Art kill him? Or does Adam win, and repeatedly win, despite The Republic’s best efforts to control his virus? These and more puzzles are layered throughout *Genesis*. Nevertheless, at its core is this: is humanity, as represented by Adam Forde, monstrous (i.e., instinctual, irrational, emotional), in contrast with the compellingly rational robots represented by Art? Or is something else at play?

*Genesis* invokes the clash between reason and passion, science and faith, empiricism and superstition. The novel’s appeal to rationality is part of its form – presented as a series of dialogues, not unlike the dialogues of Socrates drawing both on the conventions of examinations and on the tradition of philosophical dialogue. *Genesis* also engages with irrationality, through religion, superstition, and passion, through a Gothic interior, in which one finds the core elements of human behavior: love, death, killing, sin, life, and belief in the soul. If humanity is monstrous, as the robot examiners believe, it must be destroyed (even if this action makes their own society monstrous). This tension between reason and passion, between conformity and non-conformity, between society and the individual, plays out in the novel as part of young adult fiction’s concern with what it means to be human, what it means to fit into society and yet remain an individual.

If Beckett hopes that his young readers enjoy his novel’s puzzle, what purpose does that puzzle play for them? There are a few options, each of them drawing from different literary traditions. On the one hand, there is the tradition of philosophical debate, enshrined in the dialogues of Plato and his Socrates. On the other, there is the tradition of Biblical faith and human passion, visible in its title, *Genesis*, drawn from the first book of the Bible, and the

3 As stated in Longacre Press’s *Genesis* resource kit.

name of Anaximander's subject, Adam – the first human in the Bible, and perhaps the last, or only, human in the novel. There are traditions of young adult fiction in which a young protagonist (here: Anaximander), finds him- or herself growing as an individual thinker in the face of challenges of societal hierarchy and orthodoxy.

Moreover, there are traditions of Gothic science fiction, works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which explore monstrous technological creations that challenge conceptions of what it means to be alive, to have a mind, a soul, and indeed a society. All these genres (and more) are intertwined in *Genesis*, which is highly post-modern and intertextual. This paper focuses on three main strands: classical philosophy, Gothic narrative, and young adult fiction, as *Genesis* is most interesting in its engagement with these forms – a classical purity struggling with Gothic passion, in the mind of a teenage robot.

#### THE RATIONAL FRAME: CLASSICAL PURITY AND PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS

*Genesis* draws on a vision of classical antiquity (particularly, though not entirely, Greek), in which philosophical debate is a key part of reflection about the nature of society. The author signals this early on in the novel through the names of key characters. The protagonist, a girl named Anaximander, is named after the scientist Anaximander of Miletus, who sought the origins of all life. Her examination and her special subject, Adam Forde, can be seen as connecting to the novel's title and its key mystery: what is at the heart of The Republic's identity and *modus operandi*. Other characters, namely Plato, Socrates, Pericles, Thales, are also named after well-known philosophical and political thinkers. The setting is spare. Though she lives in a high-tech futuristic society, it is not hard to envisage Anaximander and her examiners sitting among classical columns or wearing chitons or togas. This is a kind of classical "purity" that has become traditional and is used in science fiction to indicate a kind of chilly intellectualism – admirable for its elegance, polished clean by the passage of time (but also worrying, because of a sense that it is fragmentary and slightly inhuman).<sup>4</sup>

4 Geoffrey Miles sees in this purity a connection to the fascist classicism often presented in dystopian fiction, such as Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, which suggests for him that "Beckett is endorsing the philosopher Karl

That chilly intellectualism is vital to the tone of *Genesis*. In his review of the novel, Patrick Ness (himself a distinguished author of young adult dystopian science fiction) writes: “Beckett has written a very different young adult novel – assured, cool, almost cold – that will make smart teenagers feel very respected.”<sup>5</sup> He refers to the novel’s presentation: a frame narrative in which rational debate seems to be the prime concern – as they would be during an examination. As Anaximander presents her interpretation of Adam Forde’s life and is interrogated by the panel of Examiners, it seems that both parties emphasize truth and clarity, seeing themselves as part of a grand tradition of philosophical debate. The Republic links itself to the thinkers of ancient Greece through the names of its main characters and thus gives a sense of connection to a grand tradition (and with it, continuity and stability). As Sarah Annes Brown observes, using classical figures (names, ideas, architecture, civilizations) is a common trope, giving a “science-fictional frisson,” reminding us of the decay of former civilizations, and looking towards the end of our own.<sup>6</sup> As she notes, the fall of the Roman Empire offers an incredibly vivid set of images warning about the passage of time and the nature of societal decay. While for many, the ruins of classical civilization seem to have an elegant polish and purity, in Gothic fiction, they offer a haunting warning against hubris: all civilizations think they will be the one to survive through time.

Such looking backward and forward is a crucial part of *Genesis*. As Anaximander provides a contextual history of Adam Forde’s life, she tells the story of a decaying human society and its replacement by new ideas, drawing on ancient Greek philosophy. In the early parts of the 21st century, she tells the Examiners, the world was being ravaged by war and plague. Isolated in the far South of the Pacific Ocean, Aotearoa escaped the main ravages and sealed itself off to refugees. Under the leadership of a billionaire calling himself Plato, who drew on the theories of the Greek philosopher Plato to develop a new Republic, an orderly society was formed. “Forward towards the Past” is the new Plato’s motto.<sup>7</sup> “The Republic,” as it became known, used rigid social control to maintain stability and stasis. It was divided into four social classes (Labourers, Soldiers, Technicians, and

Popper’s influential view of Plato as the founding father of totalitarianism.” Miles, “Utopia,” 91.

5 Patrick Ness, “*Genesis*,” *The Guardian*, 5/10/2009, available online.

6 Sarah Annes Brown, “Plato’s Stepchildren,” 416.

7 Beckett, *Genesis*, 15.

Philosophers) and encouraged social control by abolishing the concept of family. Children were raised in their social groups according to education in mathematics and genetics and a strict regime of physical training. This last, as Geoffrey Miles and Babette Pütz note, draws on aspects of Spartan culture, and the structure of *The Republic* has much in common also with that of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), in which children are prepared from birth to accept the social class into which they are arbitrarily divided.<sup>8</sup> Miles comments that the "original Plato's *Republic* was a thought experiment in defining the nature of justice," in contrast with the world in *Genesis*, shaped as a response to the threat of extinction.<sup>9</sup> Pütz further points out that "Beckett uses allusions to the foundation myth of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato's *Republic*, the so-called 'Noble Lie,'" by means of which he and Socrates planned to "get the whole state, ideally all citizens and the leaders, but at least the citizens, to believe in their shared national identity and in the state's class system."<sup>10</sup> *Genesis* is aware of the double-edged nature of uncritically aligning a new social order with one that has met its end.

Perhaps Adam Forde sees through the "Noble Lie." At any rate, he rebels against the hierarchies and divisions of *The Republic* and becomes both a popular hero and a target for punishment and destruction. Anaximander recounts the actions that set him apart from other humans and led to his imprisonment and his use as a testing device for a new form of robot – presented in his debates with Art, a prototype robot. Robots are newly developed by a member of the Philosopher class, William, to support human society (and ultimately to supplant the Labouring, Soldiering, and Technician classes).<sup>11</sup> Debate piles upon debate – in their nested narratives, Anaximander and Adam both debate their interlocutors, debating for their lives as it turns out. With only a few narrative interjections, the novel is presented almost entirely in dialogue form – a further nod to classical tradition and the dialogues of Plato and Socrates.

8 Miles, "Utopia," 87–111; Pütz, "Classical Influences in Bernard Beckett's *Genesis*, *August* and *Lullaby*," passim.

9 Miles, "Utopia," 91.

10 Pütz, "When is a Robot a Human?" (forthcoming).

11 A move that never ends well for humanity – witness the Golgafrinchans in Douglas Adams, *Life, the Universe and Everything*, who remove a seeming useless third of their population – hairdressers, telephone sanitizers, marketers – only to be wiped out by a disease caught from an un-sanitized telephone.

It may be that *Genesis*'s dialogic qualities are responsible for the "cool, almost cold" aspects of the novel that Ness observes. Certainly, the emphasis on education, rigour, and philosophical debate promotes ideas of control and mind, instead of body and feeling. But nothing is as it seems in *Genesis*. Anaximander is continually unsure about the impact of her carefully thought out statements, and though she is a good student, excited by her subject, and confident in her abilities as a historian, in the slippery matter of interpretation she finds herself entering dangerous waters.

The original Greek philosopher, Anaximander of Miletus, wrote a prose treatise *On the Nature of Things*, which "included an account of the origins of human life."<sup>12</sup> Anaximander of Miletus was a student of Thales, the first recorded Greek scientist, and advanced his theory of the place of the world in the universe – being the first to map a systematic understanding of the cosmos, and believing that all life sprang from a primordial seed he called "apeiron."<sup>13</sup> The parallel is clear – Beckett's Anaximander is on a quest to join the Academy, to find out how the world works, and be part of an elite Philosopher class who "built the blueprint for the future."<sup>14</sup> Instead, she learns the truth about the origins of robotic life: that it is the product of a hideous combination of human violence and robot adaptability.

*Anaximander:* Adam knew, didn't he? The look on his face, when he was strangled, that was a look of victory. He knew that just as Art had managed to export his program, something of him was destined to become eternal. He made Art look him in the eyes. He made him taste the power. He deliberately let the virus loose.<sup>15</sup>

The robot Republic seeks to root out the virus that is Adam's bequest, finding students who are "aggressive in their quest for knowledge"<sup>16</sup> and who sense a connection with Adam Forde. The Philosopher class promotes several lies, including both that robots are naturally peaceful and that Adam was defeated: these lies, as much as the story they conceal, are responsible for The Republic's ongoing murder of its young citizens. This is another paradox or puzzle: if one society

12 Pütz, "Classical Influences," passim.

13 See e.g., Kahn, *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology*. Thales also appears in *Genesis*, as Anaximander's best friend.

14 Beckett, *Genesis*, 61.

15 *Ibid.*, 142.

16 *Ibid.*, 143.



is to thrive, another must die, but the cost to the survivors is also tremendous. This Republic is rational, but it is also ruthless.

### "THE LAST DUBIOUS GIFT FROM A FADING PAST" – GENESIS AS GOTHIC

In contrast with this chilly frame is the life that pulses within *Genesis*, and which I associate with the novel's Gothic elements. The genre of Gothic is fascinated with life, and the borders of life are surrounded by death and threats. Art sees the soul as an essentially Gothic element of human ideology: "the soul you speak of, in turn it speaks of fear," – and that fear of course is the fear of death, the absence of life. But what life do the robot members of The Republic have, if they do not possess souls? Geoffrey Miles, in writing about the novel's dystopian elements, points out that we must "wonder how long a society can survive when it must kill off its most promising and creative members."<sup>17</sup> The elimination of the fear of death (contained in the soul), condemns robot society to a lifeless and stagnant existence. Indeed, Beckett suggests, stasis *is* a kind of death. Furthermore, the Examiners reveal that they will kill Adam as often as it takes, for as long as it takes. They also reveal that there is an essential deadness at the core of their society – it is a society that cannot evolve, cannot move forward. Despite lacking souls, and therefore lacking the fear of death, the robots are in the grip of death.

While *Genesis* is not specifically a Gothic text, its preoccupation with death and the fear of death gives it a menace, both at the level of broader society and at the level of the individual. Adding to the novel's tension, Anaximander and Adam both face death and die (and do so in confined spaces). The broader dystopian horror of The Republic, based, as Babette Pütz notes, on an ignoble lie that hides to its people its violent origins, makes itself felt in these individual moments. The Republic's official doctrine is that it is *humanity* that has monstrous (Gothic) qualities: it is humanity that falls prey to plague, to violence, to horror, to cruelty, to superstition, and to fears.<sup>18</sup> This is in stark contrast with their self-image of a rational, peaceful society. However, if it is based on a lie, then The Republic is surely as monstrous as the society it replaced?

17 Miles, "Utopia," 93.

18 Beckett, *Genesis*, 15.

Within the elegant format of *Genesis* (its emphasis on examination, dialogue, and reflection) lie both unease and horror. The relations between the frame and inner narrative highlight this tension – between smooth futuristic rationality and rough historical violence. Once one notices the Gothic elements, it is hard to unsee them: throughout both narratives run a checklist of Gothic techniques that emphasize what Brantlinger calls a “break from reality” through “internalizing conventions.”

The Gothic romance is characterized by a set of literary conventions that internalize or subjectify events, thus emphasizing the break from reality. These internalizing conventions include frame-tale narration; the use of unreliable narrators; the pattern of the double or of the ghostly, demonic alter ego; claustrophobic motifs of imprisonment, secret passages, coffins and catacombs; and metaphors that liken events to demonic possession or – what is usually the same thing – to lunacy. These are the conventions of the inward journey, into the heart of darkness of the narrator or the protagonist, through which a Gothic romance becomes an analogue for a nightmare or a delirious dream vision.<sup>19</sup>

Brantlinger notes the elements of uncertainty, of reality shaking itself apart, through the Gothic journey into a heart of darkness. Clues to the nature of Anaximander’s journey can be seen in the motifs of imprisonment that pervade the novel – the action takes place in a series of enclosed spaces: her examination room, the laboratory in which Adam and Art conduct their debates, the watchtower where Adam shoots his fellow guard, the cave in which he and the refugee Eve hide. The layers of frame narration not only emphasize a post-modern uncertainty about truth and meaning but hint at dark secrets lurking within, delaying the final revelation of Gothic darkness to the novel’s very end.

Infected individuals, the Examiners tell Anaximander at the end of the novel, are identifiable because they are fascinated by Adam Forde, because they demonstrate aggression in seeking knowledge. Anaximander has already given herself away to the examiners: her holographic reconstruction of Adam’s trial and his debates with Art reveals her pleasure in scholarship, her empathy with this long-dead rebel, and her empathy for the passions of humanity that he exhibits. As Anaximander sympathetically presents it, Adam’s story is one of a powerful individual who breaks out of a society that enforces con-

19 Brantlinger, “The Gothic Origins of Science Fiction,” 35.

formity. Key moments reveal Adam's passions. As a young teenager, he makes friends with a girl named Rebekah and follows her when she is transferred on assignment. He is demoted to the Soldier class, and once he has completed his training, he is given the role of a coastguard. From his position on the cliffs overlooking the seas near Wellington, his task is to shoot any refugees who may have made the perilous journey to Aotearoa. One day, meeting the "huge and frightened" eyes of a refugee girl named Eve, he turned his gun on Joseph, his fellow guard, and escaped with her, becoming a symbol of resistance. Anaximander reports that Adam describes this moment as a "flash, a realization. He told the authorities that he did not decide to fire, but rather heard the report of the gun echo through the small room [of the watchtower]."<sup>20</sup>

These moments, in which Adam acts instinctually out of empathy and fellow-feeling, confirm his humanity, coming from a kind of Romantic humanism. They can also seem monstrously irrational, coming from a brutal, almost bestial side of human nature. They place Adam outside of society and its rules. This is another example of *Genesis's* emphasis on a puzzling paradox: contradictory interpretations or readings make it hard to figure out what motivates Adam and what the novel promotes as ideal. Anaximander presents this moment as stemming from a kind of compassion for the refugee Eve. Her Examiner asks her: "Are you saying a society wracked by plague is preferable to one wracked by indifference?" She replies: "I think, in the circumstances, it is impossible to justify the romanticism of Adam's actions, although, given our history, we all [i.e., members of robot society] have cause to be thankful for them."<sup>21</sup> Uncertainty surrounds the moment. To understand what happened, Anaximander is sifting through historical records: surveillance videos, court reports, Adam's testimony. If Adam's action in helping Eve is the one that allows the plague into human society, leading to the need for robots and justifying their replacement of humanity later on, then the robots do have "cause to be thankful." What Adam sees in Eve's eyes is also uncertain. Perhaps she infects Adam through the power of her gaze. Perhaps Adam is already infected and, meeting her eyes, realizes what he must do to survive. The fugitives are found in a cave, and in the ensuing shootout, many soldiers are killed. Adam is put on trial and convicted.

20 Beckett, *Genesis*, 33.

21 *Ibid.*, 38.

The robot Republic indeed has much to be thankful for in Adam's actions. Later, Adam is further punished by being used as a test subject in the development of the robots who will later take over the world. One of the (human) Philosophers, Philosopher William, chooses to put him into confinement with Art, where they debate the nature of intelligence, power, and the soul. Anaximander carefully reconstructs their discussion from the available records. This debate is aggressive and competitive as if both players know how significant the stakes are. Its focus on the soul as the essence of humanity emphasizes this further, when Art claims that by believing in the soul, humanity makes our fear of death explicit:

*Art:* The soul is your most ancient Idea. Any mind that knows itself also knows the body which houses it is decaying. It knows the end will come. And a mind forced to contemplate such emptiness is a force of rare creativity. The soul can be found in every tribe, in every great tradition.<sup>22</sup>

For Art, the soul is simply an Idea, a concept used to manipulate humans, associated with the fear of death rather than a generative power moved by love or creativity:

It is not consciousness you cling to, for as I have shown you, consciousness is easily fashioned. It is eternity you long for. From the moment the soul was promised, humanity has been unable to look away. This soul you speak of, in turn it speaks of fear. And the Idea that flourishes in times of fear is the Idea that will never be dislodged. The soul offers you comfort, and in return asks only for your ignorance.<sup>23</sup>

Art's dismissiveness aside, he is right to point to humanity's many flaws – after all, humanity in *Genesis* destroys itself through fear, superstition, war, pestilence, plague, and imprisonment. Nevertheless, the soul survives. It does so in the form of Adam. While Art sets out to demolish the soul, to claim it is merely an idea, and as such no different from a computer program or virus, Adam proves him wrong, tricking Art into killing him and infecting the robot with the very soul he claims does not exist. This causes the robot to violate Philosopher William's Imperative “to cause no harm to another

22 Ibid., 108.

23 Ibid., 109.

conscious being"<sup>24</sup> by killing a human. This act infects Art with the monstrousness of murder. Furthermore, it infects all future robots made according to his program: in short, haunting robot society with the legacy of murder, making it monstrous.

Here, one can see the power of Gothic science fiction in operation, raising serious philosophical questions about the nature of good and evil, the power of humans to create new life, and the nature of monstrosity. Are humans more violent and devious than robots? Have robots, by learning to kill and violating the Imperative of Philosopher William, taken on the worst forms of their creators? Have they ceased to be rational beings and instead taken on the worst form of irrationality – namely violent destructiveness? Or, in their rational approach to killing, have they superseded humanity? Is a clinical, premeditated killing worse than an instinctual kind of violence?

Furthermore, as Art's metal fingers close around Adam's throat, Adam looks Art in the eyes, infecting Art with a second virus – this time the virus of human feeling or soul. On his face is an expression of triumph. Be it interpreted as an act of love or compassion, it is in forcing the robot to gaze into the soul of a human that Adam infects his future robotic society with the elements of humanity.<sup>25</sup> Anaximander is only one of many fellow robots infected by Adam's virus. Only Adam's descendants – only those robots with a soul – are examined; all are eliminated. The Academy exists only for this purpose, as her tutor Pericles explains to her. The robot society is monstrous, having murderous origins, having killed its creator species, and setting up those who inherit the qualities of the creator to be murdered over and over again. This is a Gothic breakdown of the boundaries between good and evil; the robot society, hiding the evidence of its original sin, commits that sin again and again.

## FEAR ITSELF: ANAXIMANDER'S CHOICE

As a work of fiction for young readers, *Genesis* highlights the choices that young protagonists make under challenging circumstan-

24 Ibid., 127.

25 This might be a subtle literary homage to Philip K. Dick's very first published genre story, "Beyond Lies the Wub" from 1952, where a wub, an intelligent and jovial pig-like creature capable of discussing Odysseus, transfers his consciousness to his human killer during one final gaze.

ces. Beckett highlights heroic moments in which both Adam and Anaximander make acts of free will, even though they know they will bring them into conflict with the status quo. As a young protagonist, Anaximander is eager to prove herself worthy to join the elite, and is conscious that she is somehow “different” from her ordinary peers. She likes to spend time alone, walking in her favorite place, “a ridge up above the city,” where she enjoys the “breeze coming in off the sea”<sup>26</sup> and takes in the spectacular sunsets:

It was the view. From the hilltops you could see the water sparkling silver, and dark against it the rusting outlines of the huge pylons, which had once supported the Great Sea Fence [from the days of Aotearoa’s defences against the plague]. To the west, the ruins of the Old City, overgrown and crumbling, being called back to the earth. A beautiful sight too, Anax thought, although she had never heard anyone else describe it that way.<sup>27</sup>

The soul is more than a fear of death: it is the love of life, of others, and of beauty. Anaximander’s enjoyment of learning and interest in life contrast with her friends who show their compliance to the status quo by suddenly developing a “careful nonchalance which appeared one day without warning, spreading through her classmates like the plague.”<sup>28</sup>

At the end of the novel, Pericles informs Anaximander that he had selected her because she showed the tell-tale signs of infection by Adam’s virus – her enjoyment of aesthetics, of intellectual debate, her sense of being set apart. He plays upon her dreams of being unique: “Pericles had told her all along that there was more to her than she realised and now, with the examination finally here, she could stop doubting it. She knew this story so well. She couldn’t imagine knowing it better. She would not let him down.”<sup>29</sup> It is not difficult to identify with Anaximander, eagerly studying for entry into the prestigious Academy, desiring to join an elite group who help to shape her world, feeling exam nerves, overthinking everything.

It is also not difficult to identify with Anaximander’s desire for free will. *Genesis* emphasizes the need for young adults to feel able to make their own decisions, and to know their minds, even if their

26 Beckett, *Genesis*, 58.

27 *Ibid.*, 58.

28 *Ibid.*, 57.

29 *Ibid.*, 61.

free will means their death. Though Anaximander is initially lured into the Academy by Pericles, who preys on her interest in ideas and affinity with Adam Forde, she too is capable of free thought. Indeed, that is her danger – the virus that Adam has infected the robots with, by looking into the eyes of Art, contains individualistic qualities – violence and love, but also freedom of thought and freedom of choice. At key moments during her examination, Anaximander realizes that she is making unorthodox choices, and while she revels in the excitement of her original thinking (another kind of original sin, in the world of *The Republic*), she is aware there are risks involved. Indeed, to have a soul is to take risks, like Adam and Anaximander prove.

The achievement of *Genesis* is to exhibit a teenager under pressure calmly thinking through her society's problems and balancing her emotions with a rational understanding of her situation. She weighs the risks against the opportunity and weighs her individual experience with the collective needs of *The Republic* and *The Academy*.

Anax thought of her own upbringing. She thought of the life outside. Her friends treated her with respect, and that respect was returned. Her teachers were kindly, and work was a duty gladly received in a land where leisure time was plentiful. The streets were safe now, day and night. The individual was trusted, no bounds were placed upon their curiosity. Anax only had to look at herself to see that. Hadn't she been given unlimited access to the files of Adam Forde even when it became clear that her findings would challenge the orthodoxy? The fear had not gone, the fear could never go, but it had been the great contribution of *The Academy* to balance fear with opportunity.<sup>30</sup>

This passage has obvious parallels to the Book of Genesis in the Bible:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." (Gen. 2:15-17)

Running through *Genesis*, of course, are religious themes, the chief among them ideas about the Creation and Fall. Tatjana Scha-

30 Beckett, *Genesis*, 113.

fer, noting that it is Adam, the human, who gives the divine breath to the robot Art, sees the humans of *Genesis* as “quasi-divine” – it is they who have created and given life to their robot successors. (Like Dr. Frankenstein and Dr. Jekyll?)<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Anaximander seems to see Adam, at the very least, as quasi-divine. For her holographic presentations to the Examiners, she highlights his hair, makes his eyes extra blue, in ways that show how much she admires him. Later, when it is revealed to the reader that Anaximander is one of the robot species, built in the form of an orang-utan, she looks at herself, seeing her “hairy body, its protruding stomach, and short bowed legs, and for the first time fe[els] uneasy, foreign.”<sup>32</sup> She feels suddenly ugly and ashamed, contrasting herself (and her species) with the “graceful, animal proportions” of Adam’s form. This moment of shame is again reminiscent of the Bible – when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of knowledge and realized their nakedness. Anaximander’s sudden revulsion at what she knew all along, namely that “it had been decided that the androids would craft not just their faces, but their bodies too, in the image of the orang-utan. It was a collective joke, a deliberate sign of disrespect to the human species that had framed them, and up to that moment she had been proud of her heritage.”<sup>33</sup> At this moment, Anaximander, and with her, the reader, realizes the extent of Art’s transgression. The Examiner explains: “In the Academy we like to call it the Original Sin. It is our little joke.”<sup>34</sup> Art, the first successful android, transmits the ability to transgress to all subsequent robots.<sup>35</sup>

Anaximander, learning this, finds out that her society is at least as sinful as humanity and at least as infected by the desire to survive. Her response is fascinating. Given the opportunity to renounce Adam, she does not, knowing that it will result in her death. This is a crucial moment in the novel when Anaximander acts out of a sense of free will, knowing that the darkness will swallow her. As a novel for young adults, *Genesis* here encapsulates the dilemma that all teenagers come to grips with at some point: how best to reconcile their desires and ambitions with the possibilities their society allows them. For Anaximander, this means coming to terms with

31 Schaefer, “Religion,” 156.

32 Beckett, *Genesis*, 139.

33 *Ibid.*, 139.

34 *Ibid.*, 142.

35 See Schaefer for a detailed analysis of the religious implications of *Genesis*.



the dark side and finding a way to stand up against it. What Art depicts as a kind of Gothic emotionality in his debates with Adam is the free expression of an individual mind, seeing through social assumptions, and acting for itself. Because of her association with Adam, because she too possesses a soul, she can act individually, even if it means her death.

As Geoffrey Miles comments, the broader tragedy of *Genesis* is that the society depicted in its pages is eliminating its most creative citizens. Anaximander is informed, thoughtful, considerate, creative, and optimistic. Unlike her classmates, who adopt a careful “nonchalance,” she has not given herself over entirely to the status quo of socialization, and in her desire to join the Academy, she betrays a desire to influence society – to be creative, and to change things.

For Art, the founder of the robot race, change is to be avoided. It is a source of fear, and the robots of The Republic believe it brought down humanity. As Anaximander explains:

The pre-Republican world had fallen prey to fear. Change had come too quickly for the people. Beliefs became more fundamental, boundaries more solidly drawn. In time, no person was left to be an individual: all were marked by nationality, by colour, by creed, by generation, by class. Fear drifted in on the rising tide.

Art was right. In the end, living is defined by dying. Bookended by oblivion, we are caught in the vice of terror, squeezed to bursting by the approaching end. Fear is ever-present, waiting to be called to the surface. Change brought fear, and fear brought destruction.<sup>36</sup>

The Republic is built to overcome this fear – of change, of death, of a life bookended by oblivion. However, as Anaximander comes to discover, rejecting change causes a different kind of decay, especially when it comes to suppressing the truth. As her examination takes her deeper and deeper into the recesses of her society's mind, she discovers “the dank stench of a truth deprived of sunlight” – in other words, the violent origins of The Republic and its ongoing murderous demands. She begins to understand, with terror, how high the stakes of her examination are. Here, one can understand the importance of her name, influenced by the Greek philosopher Anaximander of Miletus, a scientist searching for life's origins. Anaximander's

36 Beckett, *Genesis*, 112.

quest is for the origins of the society in which she lives; hence the novel's name.

Babette Pütz sees in Anaximander a figure of great optimism – she sees her examination as a kind of Pandora's box, filled with evils but also containing the seeds of hope. Though her death is tragic, it is a death she has chosen on her terms.<sup>37</sup> As Kay Sambell notes, it is a rare work of young adult dystopian fiction that ends without an element of such optimism.<sup>38</sup> Though *Genesis* contains many allusions to darkly dystopian novels for adults, such as *1984* and *Brave New World*, in which surveillance and social engineering serve to rob individuals of happiness and self-determination, *Genesis* does leave its readers with some sense of hope – at least if they consider the continued survival of the human race a positive. Anaximander's story may end with her disconnection, but she is not the only member of The Republic who has been infected with Adam's spirit. (There is Soc, for instance, another student she meets in the hallway during a break in the examination). The very existence of the Academy, expensive and complicated to run, proves that the human spirit, or soul, is hard to contain.

Furthermore, Anaximander is intelligent enough to know that she has a choice. She has continually been offered the choice – to follow the orthodox line, to suppress her individuality. But the soul (be it human or robot) cannot be suppressed, so her refusal to kowtow to the Examiners is a kind of heroic triumph, one that reinforces the idea of humanity for young readers.

## EVERYBODY YOU MEET IS ENGAGED IN A BATTLE

In a blog post about what he hopes his children will gain in their time at school, Beckett turns to another latter-day avatar of the real Plato for advice, citing a widely misattributed quotation: "Plato once said: Be kind, for everybody you meet is engaged in a battle." He explains:

For me, Plato offers two messages. The first, that kindness flows from empathy. Nobody's life is entirely easy. We will all meet fear, loneliness, and grief. And so we all need kindness, all the time. The human being appears to have evolved a unique capacity for imagining our

37 Pütz, "When is a Robot a Human?"

38 Sambell, "Presenting the Case for Social Change," *passim*.

way into the lives of others, to understand, at least partially, the world from another's point of view. . . . Or so I hope. Plato's second message, if you think about it, involves resilience. If everybody we meet is engaged in a battle, then so too are we. Life will be hard, sometimes.<sup>39</sup>

*Genesis* is a novel about that battle and the hardness of life. In it, a teenage protagonist learns just how hard life can be. The novel ends with her death, as Pericles, her favorite teacher, disconnects her by ripping her head from her body. It ends on a note of terror, as she dies. However, immediately before that, she has proven her worth as a heroine, feeling empathy for Pericles, who is doing the job he has to do. She looks into his eyes and sees sorrow in them. She may be projecting her own emotions on to him (indeed, another view of Pericles is that he has well and truly betrayed a brilliant student). As the refugee Eve to Adam, or Adam to Art before her, she may be transmitting the virus of humanity to him. She demonstrates the resilience of the human spirit, even as she faces darkness.

Teenagers, facing an increasing number of examinations in which their future careers (and lives) seem to be at stake, can identify with many elements in Anaximander's situation. Her realization that she is fighting vainly for her life and that rather than having a chance at elevation, she has been selected for elimination, may strike a chord with readers anxious about pre-existing social strata or feeling that their teachers do not understand or care about them. Many young adult novels exploit this feeling of powerlessness and alienation through presentations of bad or wicked teachers who clash with young protagonists. It is a trope that connects with the fear, expressed in dystopian fiction, that the system is rigged against the individual and individual freedom. In *The Republic*, the robot-world of *Genesis*, this is the case: individuality is a disease, and those suffering from it must be eliminated. "Surely there must be another way,"<sup>40</sup> says Anaximander, just before the teacher she loves disconnects her, concluding the novel on a moment of climax. She also meets his eyes, viewing in them sorrowful compassion. She may be projecting her feelings onto him. She may also be transmitting the virus of the human soul into his operating system, for as the refugee Eve has done with Adam, and Adam has done with Art, using the eyes as the window to the soul infects potentially receptive hearts or minds.

39 Beckett, "The Wisdom of Greeks," available online.

40 Beckett, *Genesis*, 144.

Within the lucid framework of *Genesis* lurks a lurid plot. The overlaps in *Genesis* between reason and emotion, society and the individual, the word and the action, clarity and confusion, the past and the future, science fiction and the Gothic, make this short novel a powerful experience. Moreover, if the novel is about the things that puzzle Beckett, then one might see this novel as an incredibly complicated puzzle, one in which there is no solution save that of reading it. Going with Anaximander, and Art, and Adam, into the darkness at the heart of their society enables readers to examine what it means to be human, to experience the hardships of human life, distanced by the novel's futuristic setting, made clinical by its references to long-past classical rationalism, but brought close by its emotional and Gothic power.

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## ABSTRACT

New Zealand author Bernard Beckett's young adult novel *Genesis* (2006) blends classical philosophy and Gothic tropes in a dystopian novel about the nature and ends of humanity. It is a curious work, presented in the form of philosophical dialogue and set in a future world known as The Republic, in which robots have triumphed over humanity and formed a new society based on rational order. Yet sinister underpinnings to their society and their emotional origin-story, which forms the core of this novel, show both that their rational world order is built on lies, deception, and murder, and that the human soul is harder to be rid of than they imagine. The clash between robots and humans is depicted as a clash between reason and passion, and also as a clash between a classical calm (seen in the Republic's emphasis on classical philosophy) and the Gothic emotions associated with the dark, but emotional, side of humanity. *Genesis* is a compelling reflection on the nature of the human soul, aimed at young readers. This paper will trace how that reflection plays out through Beckett's use of classical and Gothic ideals in an unusually thought-provoking dystopian work for young readers.

## KEYWORDS

ancient philosophy, young adult fiction, Plato, Anaximander, classical reception, Gothic

## IZVLEČEK

Človeškost v *Genezi* Bernarda Becketta: Anaksimander, Platon, klasična filozofija in elementi gotskega romana v distopičnem delu za mladino

Mladinski roman Bernarda Becketta *Geneza* (2006) povezuje klasično filozofijo in gotske trope v distopičnem delu o naravi in mejah človeškosti. Gre za nenavadno besedilo, predstavljeno v obliki filozofskega dialoga in postavljeno v prihodnost, v svet, imenovan Država, v katerem so roboti zavladali nad človeštvom in oblikovali novo družbo, utemeljeno na racionalnem redu. Toda zlovešča podlaga njihove družbe in njena čustvena zgodba o izvoru, ki predstavlja jedro tega romana, izdajata, da je ta racionalni svetovni red zgrajen na lažeh, zavajanju in umoru ter da se je človeške duše znebiti težje, kot si roboti nemara predstavljajo. Spopad med roboti in ljudmi je upodobljen kot spopad med razumom in strastjo, pa tudi kot spopad med klasično umirjenostjo (ki se kaže v poudarku Države na klasični filozofiji) ter gotsko obarvanimi strastmi, povezanimi s temno, vendar čustveno platjo človeštva. *Geneza* je vznemirljiv razmislek o naravi človeške duše, namenjen mladim bralcem. Članek temu razmisleku sledi skozi Beckettovo rabo klasičnih in gotskih idealov v tem miselno nenavadno izzivalnem distopičnem delu za mlade bralce.

## KLJUČNE BESEDE

antična filozofija, mladinska književnost, Platon, Anaksimander, klasična recepcija, gotski roman