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Weaving the past and present in steampunk  
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# ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

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## Zásady pro vypracování

Bakalářská práce se zaměří na zobrazení historického kontextu a problémů současnosti v steampunkovém románu (či románech) Cherie Priest. V úvodu práce studentka vymezí žánr populární literatury a také nadefinuje žánr steampunku. V souvislosti s tím se také pokusí představit problematiku alternativní historie a její užití ve steampunkové literatuře. Dále také v teoretické části zazní relevantní historické události (např. občanská válka, zlatá horečka na Klondiku, ruská kolonizace Ameriky atd.) a také současné společenské problémy (chemické a biologické zbraně, znečištění planety, feminismus, sociální třídy atd.). Studentka pojedná o zachycení této budoucnosti v kontextu alternativní historie. V praktické části studentka využije poznatků z teorie a pokusí se zachytit jak se historie a současnost prolíná ve vybraných primárních textech. Své argumenty bude studentka opírat o vhodné akademické zdroje. Vzhledem k povaze steampunkového románu bude autorka také využívat odborné recenze. K ilustraci svých tvrzení studentka využije úryvky z primárních zdrojů.

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## **ANNOTATION**

This bachelor thesis focuses on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century issues in the context of alternate history in Cherie Priest's series of novels in *The Clockwork Century*. The thesis outlines relevant literary and historical contexts, particularly the zombie genre, alternate history, Russian America, The Civil War, and the Klondike Gold Rush. Additionally, the thesis analyzes the selected series of novels and explores the issues of feminism, poverty, pollution, and biological weaponry in the context of alternate history.

## **KEYWORDS**

steampunk, pollution, classism, feminism, *The Clockwork Century*, zombies, alternate history, technology, American Civil War, biological weapons, Cherie Priest, *Boneshaker*, *Dreadnought*, *Ganymede*, *The Inexplicables*, *Fiddlehead*, *Jacaranda*

## **TITLE**

Weaving the past and present in steampunk

## **ANOTACE**

Tato bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na problematiku 20. a 21. století v kontextu alternativní historie v sérii románů *Mechanické století* od Cherie Priest. Práce nastiňuje relevantní literární a historické souvislosti, zejména žánr zombie, alternativní historii, Ruskou Ameriku, Občanskou válku a Zlatou horečku na Klondiku. Práce dále analyzuje vybranou sérii románů a zkoumá problematiku feminismu, třídní diskriminace, znečištění a biologických zbraní v kontextu alternativní historie.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

steampunk, znečištění planety, třídní diskriminace, feminismus, *Mechanické století*, zombies, alternativní historie, technologie, Americká občanská válka, biologické zbraně, Cherie Priest, *Zeměštras*, *Bitevník*, *Ganymédes*, *Nepopsatelní*, *Fiddlehead*, *Jacaranda*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	8
1. The rise of the walking dead: a distorted tapestry of history .....	12
2. Breaking boundaries: exploring feminism and classism in Cherie Priest's novels.....	17
3. Pollution and the perils of war: unraveling the environmental and biological impacts in <i>The Clockwork Century</i> .....	31
CONCLUSION.....	43
RESUMÉ .....	45
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	49



## INTRODUCTION

“In consequence of inventing machines, men will be devoured by them.”

- Jules Verne

In a world where airships soar over the smog-filled skies and gears grind in steam-powered machines, a genre which blends imagination, science fiction, and history emerges. Readers and fashion enthusiasts alike come together to find joy in a Steampunk, where nostalgia, action-packed adventures, and outlandish inventions lie. Its alternate reality setting inspires us to wonder about the possibilities which lie beyond our realms. However, steampunk literary works also serve as a mirror reflecting today's concerns. This thesis aims to examine and analyze issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century and put them in the context of alternative history, which is depicted in the novels of Cherie Priest, a series named *The Clockwork Century*, which led to the genre's resurgence. The series won the Locus Award in the category Best Science Fiction Novel and was nominated for the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award.

The first chapter examines the literary and historical overview to provide an insight into the setting of the primary texts. The first part deals with the introduction of the zombie genre, which encompasses its features and underlying themes, such as the *uncanny valley*, what it means to be human, and human supremacy over other species. It also introduces the concept of an alternate reality, which captivates readers by altering familiar historical events which define today's reality. The third part of this chapter revolves around the significance of Russian America, the American Civil War, and the Klondike Gold Rush, which are events all present within the novels and shape the story's narrative. This part delves deeper into the fact that while some parts of those historical events portrayed in the novels align with history, there are certain deviations. By reimagining those outcomes, Cherie Priest makes readers reconsider the world of today.

The second chapter delves into an analysis of problems in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century depicted in the steampunk novels of Cherie Priest. It places them in the context of alternate history and focuses predominantly on feminism and class discrimination and injustices. The first part illustrates the feminist movement and examines it through the literary lens as women's experiences unfold in the novels. This part further analyzes the feminist mindset interwoven with the characters Priest created as they navigate through the story challenging gender roles and expectations and pursue their goals without compromising their agency. The second part provides an overview of *classism* and economic disparities, after which it

analyzes the portrayal of characters in Priest's novels, who face economic challenges and inequalities in a dangerous world plagued by war, zombies, and powerful machines. Overall, this chapter aims to provide an understanding of how feminism and class discrimination intersects steampunk literature and how Priest's characters are nuanced and diverse.

The third and final chapter looks into environmental and biological impacts, which Priest's novels depict. This chapter delves into the intertwined issues of pollution and biological and chemical weaponry. It explores these problems through the lens of alternate history and provides a theoretical framework that serves as a reminder of which consequences war, negligence, and technology pose. It also analyzes how pollution and biological weapons are present within the world of *The Clockwork Century*, as characters traverse polluted lands, drink from tainted water supplies, and struggle to breathe without gas masks. It also highlights the ethical and environmental implications.

Murphy and Matterson, in *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction*, argue that popular fiction is often seen as “commercial fiction,” which has an entertainment purpose, not an academic “literary” one. That being said, the genre is ever-evolving, blending “commercial” and “literary” together. The boundaries are blurred, and “serious” writers incorporate the elements of popular fiction into their works. The recognition of popular fiction is seen in authors such as Stephen King, Gillian Flynn, and Colson Whitehead, which demonstrates that the genre earned its place in the literary world. Popular fiction no longer seeks to be intellectually challenging to be validated as an intellectually stimulating and challenging field of academic study.<sup>1</sup> In a slightly earlier work, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, Gelder does not share this view. The terms “Industry” and “entertainment” separate popular fiction from literary fiction. He sees the genre as pure entertainment, a product to be sold, a genre synonymous to the “culture industry.”<sup>2</sup> According to Gelder, the genre has little to no educational or artistic value, just as it was seen in the past. The features of popular fiction, which shape its product, marketing and evaluation, are plot, convention, simplicity, and pace.<sup>3</sup> The genre is not supposed to be original and high quality but marketable and, in large quantities, accessible to a large audience. Sentiment towards the

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<sup>1</sup> Bernice M Murphy and Stephen Matterson, *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction : The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire; New York: Routledge, 2004), 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Gelder, *Popular Fiction*, 9-11.

genre aside, Gelder does agree that the genre is ever-evolving and diverse, as the term “popular” encompasses meaning which depends on the country and changes over time.<sup>4</sup>

Cherie Priest’s *The Clockwork Century*<sup>5</sup> falls under the popular fiction genre, as the series led to the resurgence of the steampunk subgenre. Her work combines the genre of steampunk with Western, which creates a genre hybrid. As mentioned by Siemann, Priest is one “of the most prominent second-generation authors of steampunk,” which led to the emergence of steampunk becoming an aesthetic, inspiring fashion designers, as well as filmmakers. Additionally, while steampunk is typically set in Victorian Britain, *The Clockwork Century* is set in America during the Civil War.<sup>6</sup> Siemann describes the genre as “simultaneously a genre, an aesthetic and a subculture, incorporating technology and aesthetics which extrapolate from the steam-powered technologies of the nineteenth century.”<sup>7</sup>

To fully grasp the genre of steampunk, it is crucial to mention its literary evolution. As Jeff Vandermeer highlights, a significant impact on the development of steampunk fiction in the 20th century came from Jules Verne. The inventions in his works, such as *Nautilus* from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, would inspire other authors to look at technology through an imaginative lens. Verne introduced machinery as art and decoration, which was practical and beautiful. In his works, he also warned the readers about the dangers of inventions and technological exploitation.<sup>8</sup> Verne would not be the sole influence of the genre, however. As Vandermeer illustrates in his book, another author influencing the genre from a different point of view was H. G. Wells. As a socialist, his works portray his upbringing in the lower middle class and his support of the women's rights movement.<sup>10</sup>

His earlier works are regarded as the cornerstones of science fiction, such as *The War of the Worlds*,<sup>11</sup> about which Vandermeer states:

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<sup>4</sup> Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire; New York: Routledge, 2004), 10-15.

<sup>5</sup> Cherie Priest, *Boneshaker* (London: Tor, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Siemann, “Cherie Priest: History and Technology,” in *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction*, ed. Bernice M. Murphy and Stephen Matterson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, C, 2018), 234.

<sup>7</sup> Siemann, “Cherie Priest: History and Technology,” 234-235.

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Vandermeer and S J Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible: An Illustrated Guide to the World of Imaginary Airships, Corsets and Goggles, Mad Scientists, and Strange Literature* (New York: Abrams Image, 2011), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (Library of Alexandria, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Vandermeer et al., *The Steampunk Bible*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine: The War of the Worlds* (Reader’s Library Classics, 2021).

*The War of the worlds* is a particularly complex book that has often been interpreted as pertaining to British imperialism, Victorian repression, and the theory of evolution. Like much of his fiction (and Verne's), it was considered *scientific romance* at the time, a term that could describe a fair number of modern Steampunk novels.<sup>12</sup>

Siemann adds that with the help of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling and their novel, *The Difference Engine*<sup>13</sup>, steampunk was brought to the public eye and gained significant popularity as a genre of its own. Later, steampunk fiction became well-known for its feminist themes. Heroines of Steampunk were not “constrained by the limits of Victorian society” but “adventurous, inventive and unconventional.”<sup>14</sup> Priest’s work recognizes societal problems and combines them with “action-packed storylines and its plentiful steampunked technology,” which are the main features of Steampunk. Seimann further adds that “Cherie Priest’s steampunk series redefines the genre for the twenty-first century.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Vandermeer et al., *The Steampunk Bible*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine* (New York: Spectra, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Siemann, “Cherie Priest: History and Technology,” 236.

<sup>15</sup> Siemann, “Cherie Priest: History and Technology,” 240-242.

## 1. THE RISE OF THE WALKING DEAD: A DISTORTED TAPESTRY OF HISTORY

As said by Tim Lanzendörfer in *Books of the Dead*, zombies used to primarily belong under the horror genre or science fiction. However, as this type of monster became a cultural phenomenon, it began to slowly appear in more genres, even such as romance. Therefore, it can be said that the Zombie genre successfully became its own independent genre.<sup>16</sup> In *Monsters and Monstruous*, Kevin Alexander Boon clarifies that the genre is based on human supremacy across the species residing on Earth. Humans are viewed as the most evolved species deserving of all that Earth has to offer. Therefore, anything lesser or subpar to humans is undeserving. The Zombies look like humans, used to be humans, and target humans. The genre sets to question human identity and what it means to be human.<sup>17</sup> Zombies can also represent the phenomenon of *Uncanny Valley*. As said in *The Uncanny Valley [From the Field]*, looking at something with a human appearance but not precisely human can create a sense of revulsion, fear, or unease. This concept can be seen with hyper-realistic robots, animation, and zombies.<sup>18</sup>

Cherie Priest's zombies are not called zombies but *rotters*. As the name suggests, they are quite literally rotting away and decomposing. They used to be humans, which breathed in so-called *Blight*. *Blight* is a "thick, slow-moving substance that kill[s] by contamination"<sup>19</sup> and the source of the zombie sickness and water and air pollution. Another way of becoming a *rotter* is to ingest too much *Lemon sap*. *Lemon sap* is a "cheap drug— a yellowish, gritty, pastelike substance distilled from the *Blight* gas."<sup>20</sup> Although inexpensive, those who ingest large doses slowly but surely pass away. After dying, their bodies necrotize and wither away, only to be reawakened as a zombie a few moments later but unable to move.

The presence of zombies causes characters in *Boneshaker* feelings of unease, fear, and sorrow. While they could be seen as only a diseased mass of bodies, feeding on life and

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<sup>16</sup> Tim Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2018), 3-5

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Alexander Boon, "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil* (Amsterdam; New York, Ny: Rodopi, 2007), 33.

<sup>18</sup> Masahiro Mori, Karl MacDorman, and Norri Kageki, "The Uncanny Valley [from the Field]," *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine* 19, no. 2 (June 2012): 98–100, <https://doi.org/10.1109/mra.2012.2192811>.

<sup>19</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 52.

tearing their way through everything in their path to eat, they used to be human. They represent the great tragedy that befell Seattle. However, they also used to be the character's neighbors, relatives, and friends.<sup>21</sup> Even though Briar finds it difficult to kill her friend, which turned into a zombie, she also hopes for a possibility to give the infected the respectable death and dignity they deserve, as they did not choose to become zombies. She clearly states, “[t]hey had been people once, and they deserved better.”<sup>22</sup>

Hellekson highlights that alternate history is a genre that “[...] concerns itself with history's turning out differently than what we know to be true.”<sup>23</sup> To rephrase, the genre takes an event that did not happen in this reality; therefore, the future is changed consequently. The genre may also be called “alternative histories, alternate universes, allohistories, or uchronias.”<sup>24</sup> Alternate history is a subgenre of science fiction where the writer poses a question about how the world would change if something went differently at some point in history. Similarly to the zombie genre mentioned above, this genre uses the feeling of “otherness” or “estrangement” to captivate its readers, with the difference being not using scary imagery like zombies but using history, which is ingrained in people's minds.<sup>25</sup> Changing something so concrete as the past, a concept that is supposed to be unchangeable creates a sense of unease but also captivates the reader. The genre “[...] make[s] readers rethink their world and how it has become what it is,” therefore it challenges our own preestablished and ingrained truths about time and space, as well as highlights the importance of how the actual past, present and the future shape the world today.<sup>26</sup>

According to Siemann, Priest's *The Clockwork Century* novels are set in an alternate history, in which 1865 is not the year of the American Civil War's end. On the contrary, it was prolonged until 1880 due to the help of technological advancements. This significantly changed the event and the war's outcome, as the Confederacy was recognized as an independent country.<sup>27</sup> Numerous historical events in the novel do correlate with the history of today. However, it is mostly the places where the events take place, not what happened or the outcome. For example, the Civil War did start in Fort Sumter,<sup>28</sup> as is also mentioned in

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<sup>21</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 232.

<sup>22</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 397.

<sup>23</sup> Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Hellekson, *The Alternate History*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Hellekson, *The Alternate History*, 9-11.

<sup>26</sup> Hellekson, *The Alternate History*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Siemann, “Cherie Priest: History and Technology,” 234-235.

<sup>28</sup> Frederic L Paxson, *The American Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1945), 51-53.

*Boneshaker*. Briar recalls her childhood “when the first shots were fired on Fort Sumter, and the war had begun.”<sup>29</sup> However, there is an example of history being altered in the novel shortly after. The abolition of slavery happened slightly earlier, in the 1860s, as opposed to the real date, 1865<sup>30</sup>. It is also more profound in the novel, with all the states abolishing it much faster, and the attitudes towards it are slightly different. In the novel, confederate state crack under pressure and one by one abolish slavery to appear progressive, and even though slavery is no longer in place, the war continues.<sup>31</sup> Some of the other events, which are different, Siemann mentions, “Stonewall Jackson survived Chancellorsville. England broke the Union’s naval blockade and formally recognized the Confederate States of America. Atlanta never burned.” Other historical elements, added instead, consist of “steam-powered war machines,” “environmental catastrophes,” and the zombie apocalypse.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the most essential part of the steampunk series’ setting is the alternate version of events during the Civil War. It creates conflict among the characters and drives the story forward. As said by Batty and Parish in *The Divided Union*, The Civil War started on April 12, 1861, and ended on April 26, 1865. The Civil War, also named the “War Between the States”<sup>33</sup>, happened between the United States and The Confederate States of America. The Confederacy comprised 11 southern states<sup>34</sup>, seceded from the rest to form their own country after the election of Abraham Lincoln, a member of the Republican party, which held an opposing, antislavery ideology<sup>35</sup>. The cause of the conflict was the tension concerning the Confederacy’s advocacy and the Union’s condemnation of slavery. The Northern states rapidly modernized and diversified their economy, industrialization occurred, and investment into transportation and infrastructure, such as roads, railroads, and canals. More industries bloomed and prospered, especially banking and communication.<sup>36</sup>

As Batty and Parish explain, the issue of slavery being spread to other states has been a sensitive topic, which led to several laws being put in place, such as the Missouri Compromise of 1820.<sup>37</sup> After the end of the Mexican-American war in 1848, many northerners expressed their severe condemnation of slavery for moral reasons and wished for

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<sup>29</sup> Cherie Priest, *Dreadnought*. (Pan Books Ltd, 2012), 28.

<sup>30</sup> Paxson, *The American Civil War*, 109-110.

<sup>31</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*.

<sup>32</sup> Siemann, “Cherie Priest: History and Technology,” 228.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Batty and Peter Joseph Parish, *The Divided Union* (Tempus Publishing, Limited, 1999), 213.

<sup>34</sup> Batty et al., *The Divided Union*, 181-183.

<sup>35</sup> Batty et al., *The Divided Union*, 40-42.

<sup>36</sup> Batty et al., *The Divided Union*, 15-20.

<sup>37</sup> Batty et al., *The Divided Union*, 16-19.

it to be abolished altogether<sup>38</sup>. The Southerners, heavily economically dependent on slavery, did not share this opinion and expressed anxieties that not spreading slavery would lead to heavy losses. Unable to resolve the matter peacefully, the battle began<sup>39</sup>. Paxson adds that after years of fighting and many casualties, The Northern States celebrated a victory. Their naval forces, the number of troops, and financial abundance were all factors that secured the Union its victory. The Confederacy lacked proper leadership, funds, and infrastructure, which led to their surrender.<sup>40</sup>

To add further context to the setting of *The Clockwork Century*, it is essential to mention “Russian America”, which, as discussed by Grinëv, relates to the historical period when the Russian Empire colonized territories located in North America. The colonies were situated in the region of Alaska and certain parts of the Pacific Northwest. The colonization started with expeditions and gradually formed into Russian settlements and the formation of the “Russian-American company”.<sup>41</sup> As mentioned by Vinkovetsky in *Russian America*, the main reason for colonizing the North was its plentitude of mammals that could be hunted for fur, especially sea otters.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the Russians established a prosperous fur trade. The Russian colonization of North America started in the 1800s. It ended in 1867, with Alaska being sold to the United States for 7.2 million dollars after Russia concluded their colonies were too expensive to keep.<sup>43</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region of Alaska became famous for its abundance of natural resources and mainly gold. As Morse mentions, the discovery of gold in 1896 in the rivers of western Yukon territory triggered a mass migration to the region, despite its hostile environment. The most well know route was the Chilkoot Trail, which was very steep and taxing to traverse, primarily because of the many supplies and equipment miners had to carry along it.<sup>44</sup> Most individuals seeking gold came to Yukon territory unprepared for its unforgiving climate. The temperatures were freezing, and the terrain was rough. Water supply, wildlife, and permafrost were only some of the challenges miners had to face.<sup>45</sup> Many

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<sup>38</sup> Batty et al., *The Divided Union*, 30-33.

<sup>39</sup> Batty et al., *The Divided Union*, 42-48.

<sup>40</sup> Paxson, *The American Civil War*, 179-245.

<sup>41</sup> A. V. Grinëv and Richard L Bland, *Russian Colonization of Alaska: Preconditions, Discovery, and Initial Development, 1741-1799* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 19-20.

<sup>42</sup> Ilya Vinkovetsky, *Russian America: An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire, 1804-1867* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 108-109.

<sup>43</sup> Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 198-101.

<sup>44</sup> Kathryn Morse, *The Nature of Gold* (University of Washington Press, 2009), 22-23.

<sup>45</sup> Morse, *The Nature of Gold*, 23-25.



of those searching for gold did not survive the journey due to starvation, avalanches, and severe cases of hypothermia.<sup>46</sup> The gold rush did not affect only the miners. The indigenous people were severely affected by the gold rush. Their lands and resources were exploited, their natural resources were depleted, forests cleared, and land was staked for mining claims.<sup>47</sup> The gold seekers brought diseases with them as well, such as influenza and smallpox, which the indigenous people were never exposed to.<sup>48</sup>

The imagery associated with the gold rush is the massive immigration of people seeking to find their fortune in Alaska. The historical period is somewhat romanticized,<sup>49</sup> similar to how it is portrayed in Priest's novels. In *Dreadnought*, Mercy recalls how her "daddy ran off when I was little. Went West, with his brother and my cousin, looking for gold in Alaska—or that was the plan as I heard it. For a while he sent letters. But when I was about seven years old, the letters just . . . stopped."<sup>50</sup> This shows the frenzy the gold rush created, resulting in people dropping everything and abandoning their families in search of monetary gains, most likely not returning, either finding their fortune or perishing.

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<sup>46</sup> Morse, *The Nature of Gold*, 83-85.

<sup>47</sup> Morse, *The Nature of Gold*, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Morse, *The Nature of Gold*, 207.

<sup>49</sup> Morse, *The Nature of Gold*, 172.

<sup>50</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 43.

## 2. BREAKING BOUNDARIES: EXPLORING FEMINISM AND CLASSISM IN CHERIE PRIEST'S NOVELS

From its origin till the present day, feminism has been a polarizing topic that divides or brings society together. According to Brunell and Burkett, *Feminism* is a political movement that advocates for equal rights and opportunities for all genders, which focuses on challenging gender roles, expectations, inequalities, and oppression based on gender. Feminism acknowledges that women have been disadvantaged and marginalized compared to men in many societies throughout history. There are multitudes of approaches and perspectives on feminism, with one of the vital aspects being gender equality to create a culture in which the treatment and hierarchy of genders are equal. Feminism focuses on intersectionality as well, to recognize that gender intersects other identities, such as race, sexuality, and class, which results in discrimination and oppression as well. Another aspect is the empowerment and agency of individuals, which supports the ability to make choices without the restraints of expectations. Feminism allows women from marginalized communities to live without someone else's control and pursue their aspirations. Breaking free from gender norms and challenging them, as well as breaking stereotypes surrounding the genders, is also an essential aspect of feminism.<sup>51</sup>

Feminism is represented in literature, filmmaking, and other branches of art, to represent and explore women's experiences and challenges in literary works. The movement spreads across prose, poetry, play, and much more. Literature, considered feminist, explores the identity, power dynamics, inequalities, gender roles, and other aspects of women's lives through the literary lens.<sup>52</sup> In a broader sense, feminism in literature shares goals with the feminist movement and supports its beliefs. As said by Westfahl, feminist literary works may sometimes "highlight sexism,"<sup>53</sup> such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*<sup>54</sup>, which features a "misogynistic regime" to spread awareness about the importance of feminism.<sup>55</sup>

Westfal also comments on science fiction and fantasy genres because they "serve as important vehicles for feminist thought, particularly as bridges between theory and

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<sup>51</sup> Laura Brunell and Elinor Burkett, "Feminism," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>.

<sup>52</sup> Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy, *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1990), 7-10.

<sup>53</sup> Gary Westfahl, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works and Wonders / 1 [Themes a - K]*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005), 290.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; repr., Anchor Books, 1985).

<sup>55</sup> Westfahl, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia*, 290.

practice.”<sup>56</sup> Therefore, some depictions of feminism serve as a warning of what could happen in our society if women’s rights were compromised.

“No other genres so actively invite representation of the ultimate goals of feminism: worlds free of sexism, worlds in which women’s contributions (to science) are recognized and valued, worlds that explore the diversity of women’s desire and sexuality, and the worlds that move beyond gender.”<sup>57</sup>

To expand upon that idea, the worlds of fantasy and science fiction allow for alternate realities which reflect the feminist ideology, sometimes reaching utopian portrayals or depicting worlds that lack feminism entirely. These works can serve as motivation or inspiration about what the future could hold for all genders or as cautionary tales about what could happen if the rights of all genders are taken away.

According to Perschon, Priest’s novels feature diverse female characters with a wide representation of women of different ages, races, class, and occupations. “Priest’s heroines move from the domestic spaces of matrimony and maternity into the wild blue yonder.” The heroines, which Priest created, abandon traditional domestic roles of housewives and mothers and delve into exciting, adventurous, and, most importantly, dangerous activities. They are not interested in standing in the background or being told they should mind their manners while the action happens around them.<sup>58</sup>

The women in Priest’s series help where they can and take the lead when they think they need to. They are agents that drive the story’s plot to where it needs to go. Perschon adds that the characters are also “complex” and “recognizable as human” and do not have to choose between their occupation and family. In *The Clockwork Century*, the female characters “can have career and family, and do it all while [...] delivering a high-tech prototype of underwater vessel to Union forces.”<sup>59</sup> King comments on this refreshing depiction of women, as they break old stereotypes, being classified only as either an “angel” or a “fiend,” and dismantle old social taboos.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Westfahl, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia*, 290.

<sup>57</sup> Westfahl, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia*, 291.

<sup>58</sup> Mike Perschon, “Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels,” in *Steaming into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 58-62.

<sup>59</sup> Perschon, “Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels,” 60-61.

<sup>60</sup> Jeannette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (London Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005), 6.

Priest's novels align with feminist ideology because, according to Perschon, she "imagines her heroines this way in defiance of the expectation that all female leads need a romantic interest, instead filling the lives of these women with epic challenges common to the male action hero."<sup>61</sup> The series has little to no romance, and the women in it seem to have no need for it. They are respectful towards the opposite sex but focus more on their missions, interests, and friends rather than chase male characters or set their goals aside to pursue a romantic relationship. As said in *Boneshaker*, "We girls need to stick together, don't we?"<sup>62</sup> Perschon describes them as "strong female characters transcending nineteenth-century gender stereotypes and limitations, without oversimplification."<sup>63</sup> While her characters break away from societal constraints, they still do not have it easy. Priest does not create a feminist utopia that would be free from misogyny, racism, or sexism. As Perschon says, they "are strong women, they don't live in a world of egalitarian emancipation."<sup>64</sup> The female characters are also flawed, fully fleshed-out human beings.

In *Boneshaker*, one such character is "Briar Wilkes, a factory-working mother who pursues her son into walled Seattle to rescue him."<sup>65</sup> And while she is a mother, which is a typical role for a female character, she is much more than that, for she "abandons all to find her lost son in a walled Seattle peopled with outlaws and zombie revenants"<sup>66</sup> Briar is a 35-year-old single mother who struggles with male figures in her life, her husband and father, both now deceased, and grew up without a feminine role model. Her father raised her alone, was not very good at it, and his nature was controlling and "a tyrant."<sup>67</sup> It hurts her to hear praise about her father's bravery or any positive thought about him, as she does not think he deserves recognition. In her mind, he was only a good person outside of his family life. Her son, Zeke, reminds her of her husband more every single day as he's growing up, which leads to her flinching away from him when he gets angry, and she expects him to hit her.<sup>68</sup> This highlights her fear of violent men, which is a pattern in her life.

As for her husband, Levi, she did deeply care for him. He was a good husband to her until he was not. He did not let her see what he was, as a scientist, working on. "She'd never figured out for certain if her husband had kept so quiet because he didn't trust her, or because

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<sup>61</sup> Perschon, "Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels," 58-59.

<sup>62</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 248.

<sup>63</sup> Perschon, "Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels," 59.

<sup>64</sup> Perschon, "Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels," 59.

<sup>65</sup> Perschon, "Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels," 53.

<sup>66</sup> Perschon, "Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels," 58.

<sup>67</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 22-25.

<sup>68</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 38.

he thought she was stupid. It was likely a bit of both.”<sup>69</sup> He looked down on her and did not see her as someone who could have contributed in any shape or form. Further in the novel, Briar explains that her husband did not love her but wanted to own her, as he was a collector. “I’m just one more thing that belongs to him.”<sup>70</sup> Implying wives are possessions, not human beings. Briar’s complicated relationships with men run deeper than only her feelings and opinion. Her reputation within her neighborhood is defined by her father and husband and their actions. She is seen as an extension of them, a culprit by association, which she calls a “curse”. People see her in the same light as them, not as her person, even though she had little to do with their actions, let alone condones them.<sup>71</sup>

Briar’s attire is not typically feminine and deviates from the type of clothing society would approve of on a woman. When she goes home after a long day at work at the water filtering facility, “her boots [are] caked with the filth of the plant” and she’s “wearing pants like a man.”<sup>72</sup> Wearing dirty clothing from manual jobs is more associated with typically male professions, as are trousers. Briar chooses practical clothes, which allow movement, and can get messy without being ruined. Her disheveled appearance would be considered unladylike but provide her with protection from the hot steam in her place of work, or “the superheated metal of the tanks”<sup>73</sup> as well as from the dangers hidden in Seattle.

Despite Briar’s ability to hold her own in the world, she is underestimated because of her gender. When she asks to enter the city, she is told, “It’s no place for a woman [...]” The city is dangerous for everyone, and the *rotters* attack all, not according to gender. Briar retorts that “I don’t care if it’s no place for a dog or a rat, it’s going to have a woman in it before sundown, so help me God [...],”<sup>74</sup> further highlighting the absurdity of the city being any less dangerous for a man, or animals.

Another character in *Boneshaker* is Princess Angeline, an old Native American woman without conventionally attractive looks. Zeke comments that “she was old, and no one gets to be that old without being smart and strong,”<sup>75</sup> which Angeline certainly is, quite literally, as she is described as having “[...] arms stronger than just about any man he’d ever

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<sup>69</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 56.

<sup>70</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 258.

<sup>71</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 42.

<sup>72</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 23.

<sup>73</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 45.

<sup>74</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 86.

<sup>75</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 160.

met.”<sup>76</sup> Princess Angeline’s clothes are not feminine either. She wears clothes that “belonged to a man,”<sup>77</sup> and her pants are too big for her. She hates being called “ma’am” and is described as looking “androgynous.”<sup>78</sup> Zeke questions her attire: “Why do you dress like a man?” and she answers, “Because I feel like it.”<sup>79</sup> She does not dress in a feminine way nor does she want to, and cares not for the opinion of others about her behavior or appearance. In *The Inexplicables*, when Rector first meets Angeline, he describes her: “Everything about her was efficient and tough, from the fit of her clothes, which he guessed had once belonged to a man, to the rifle slung over her back.”<sup>80</sup> She is unusual to the average onlooker and does not represent the stereotypical feminine trait usually seen in female characters.

Another character is a bartender, Lucy, which has only one arm, which is artificial, and shoots a crossbow. She is the owner of an underground bar, *The Maynard’s*,<sup>81</sup> and holds a certain amount of authority within the walls. During a crisis, all men turn to her for instructions. “It’s your call, Ms. Lucy.” after which she says, “It’s always my goddamned call.”<sup>82</sup> This highlights how female characters take leading roles in action, which is usually a role left for male characters. Princess Angeline describes Lucy as a “tough old bird,” who is able to “break down doors or men or *rotters*.”<sup>83</sup>

*Dreadnought’s* main protagonist is “Mercy Lynch, a wartime nurse who travels across the United States to see her dying father a final time.”<sup>84</sup> She is young, pretty, and “can wield pistols, but she is most useful as a healer.”<sup>85</sup> Even though her profession is a traditional role for a woman, she is still a hero in her story, taking down *Dreadnought’s* villain with her guns.

Mercy has a certain way she deals with her male patients. She takes advantage of being a woman and acts as a motherly figure to them, despite being much younger than them. When Mr. Clinton gets separated from the group in the chaos of battle, mercy calls out for him “using her best and most authoritative patient-managing voice.”<sup>86</sup> She uses the voice of authority and takes the lead to keep everyone calm in a stressful situation. When she and

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<sup>76</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 208.

<sup>77</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 207.

<sup>78</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 206-207.

<sup>79</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 211.

<sup>80</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables* (London: Tor, 2013), 85.

<sup>81</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 187.

<sup>82</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 198.

<sup>83</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 212.

<sup>84</sup> Perschon, “Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels,” 53.

<sup>85</sup> Perschon, “Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels,” 61.

<sup>86</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 90.

Ernie set out to find the rest of their group in the midst of a battle, Ernie expresses his disapproval of “[...] leaving a lady alone on a battlefield.” He tells Mercy, “You’re not a soldier,” and she retorts, “Neither are you.”<sup>87</sup> This highlights the paradox of either of them staying on the battlefield. Ernie is not suited to be there either. He is not a soldier and is wounded, but his view of women as fragile beings blinds him to the situation that they are both equally underprepared, regardless of gender.

Mercy encounters many characters throughout her journey, but one thing stays consistent. She is treated differently because of her gender and profession. Because she is a woman, she gets treated unkindly, while her career earns her respect and admiration. In a way, her job transcends the barriers her gender traps her in. “One of them called out to her, opening his mouth to say something dirty or childish. [...] Mercy turned his way, the man closed his mouth. ‘Pardon me, Nurse. Ma’am,’ he said upon seeing her cloak and the cross on her satchel.”<sup>88</sup> He only changed his mind about being rude after realizing she is a nurse. Sometimes, not even that is enough. As she enters a hotel, Mercy is stereotyped as a woman traveling alone. The receptionist adds, “this ain’t that kind of establishment” right after he asks where her husband is.<sup>89</sup> He is under the assumption that if a woman is alone, she must be a prostitute, which is an old stereotype.

Despite being disrespected because of her gender, her job makes up for it by giving her many advantages. When she encounters a woman running a red cross hospital, she is asked to give a “professional’s opinion,” despite the fact that she has no actual knowledge about her skills, only that she is a nurse. Mercy is given free lodgings afterward for helping.<sup>90</sup> When on board of an airship, Mercy is warned about being the only woman aboard and to watch herself. She replies: “[...] I done some of my best work surrounded by men” and “I’ve learned the hard way how to handle them myself.”<sup>91</sup> She is proud of her work and skills and not afraid to deal with the opposite gender, even in their worst moments, in horrible pain or dying.

*Dreadnought* also features a woman, which holds a typically male profession, a military commander. Captain Sally is a woman that inspires authority and has the highest rank in the hospital. Despite her high ranking and the role of leader, she keeps her femininity.

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<sup>87</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 94.

<sup>88</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 52-53.

<sup>89</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 112-113.

<sup>90</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 135.

<sup>91</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 147.

When Mercy loses her husband, Sally switches from her commander, and she acts as a mother would.<sup>92</sup> Mercy later recalls: “She runs that place good as any man, and probably better than some.”<sup>93</sup> She acknowledges Sally’s skills and does not doubt her place or rank because of her gender. To conclude, in the words of Mike Perschon, the women Priest writes are “damsels without distress.”<sup>94</sup> They are diverse, well-represented, and are the heroes of their own stories in an unforgiving, zombie-ridden world, which does not do them any favors.

In any society going through significant economic or technological changes, there will be those who benefit from such progress and those who do not. According to Lewis in *Culture and Poverty*, those who do not benefit from development are politically powerless, frequently immigrants and minorities. This can be seen in *Ganymede*, “Times are hard all over. We might find foreigners—or maybe Westerners—desperate enough to take the job.”<sup>95</sup> Josephine suggests that desperate immigrants are more likely to take dangerous jobs for a high price. The notion that progress only benefits some can be further seen when Josephine meets her brother, who is forced to live in the bayou in order to fulfil a mission.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 20.

<sup>93</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought* 147.

<sup>94</sup> Perschon, “Social Retrofuturism in the Steampunk Novels,” 56.

<sup>95</sup> Cherie Priest, *Ganymede* (London: Macmillan, 2016), 17.

<sup>96</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 18.



“Life was hard outside the city, in the swamps where the guerrillas lurked, and poached, and picked off Confederates and Texans whenever they could. It was written all over her brother’s flesh, in the insect bites and scrapes of thorns. The story was told in the rips that had been patched and repatched on his homespun pants, and in the linen shirt with its round wood buttons—none of which matched.”<sup>97</sup>

This suggests that while the city is very close by, the conditions people live in are severely different, only a few meters away from it. And while there are certain inequalities within urban living, being forced to live outside civilization, among alligators in a damp swamp, is much worse. The horrible conditions are further illustrated by an officer, who is trying to uncover those hidden in the bayou: “Those swamp rats, they don’t have the money or resources to make such a stink on their own. Out there in the sopping wet middle of noplacé, there’s not even anything worth stealing. Someone’s keeping them in guns and ammo.”<sup>98</sup> The officer knows that getting supplies or simply living in such horrid conditions is nearly impossible. The Texans are counting on them running out of supplies and catching them. The term “rats” is used to describe them, comparing them to generally invasive, unclean and diseased animals, which reside in a bayou.

As said by Lewis, however, those in the lower-class bracket are not considered people who should be supported but as an expensive problem. Often, they are viewed as a mistake that should be kept quiet and only used as cheap labor. The poor are the most vulnerable during economic falls, such as a recession. They require more assistance from the government and are used as talking points during elections.<sup>99</sup> Such a case can be seen in *Boneshaker*, as those, who lost everything during the destruction of Seattle and the disease outbreak, are not helped by their country. The government is preoccupied with the civil war and refuses to acknowledge that the tragedy has even happened. Lucy mentions that it is only a matter of time before the walls can no longer contain the contagion.<sup>100</sup> The citizens left behind struggling to make ends meet can only hope that after the civil war ends, Washington becomes a state, and the government will find enough motivation to find a solution.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 18.

<sup>98</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 43.

<sup>99</sup> Oscar Lewis, “Culture and Poverty,” in *Anthropological Realities: Readings in the Science of Culture*, ed. Jeanne Guillemin (Transaction Publishers, 1980). 311-312.

<sup>100</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 242-243.

<sup>101</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 104-105.

In *Ganymede*, the city of New Orleans is illustrated multiple times as having good conditions exclusively for the wealthy, such as:

“Bigger cities had bigger, better regulated docks; but on the unincorporated frontier, these mobile constructions squatted wherever they found a place to do so. Dangerous, dirty, and marginally managed by whoever was richest and had the biggest guns, the docks were not popular with travelers or merchants, but they were necessary. And heaven knew the air pirates were happy to make use of them.”<sup>102</sup>

This implies that dangerous individuals like pirates frequent places with little to no regulation and security. The docks mainly employ anyone desperate enough to make money, even in an unsafe and filthy place. Places of employment with high risk and low payment are often the only ones that employ the poor, the uneducated, or immigrants.

As Lemanski mentions in *Poverty: Multiple Perspectives and Strategies*, the poor become disadvantaged during economic changes, especially in cities, because urban life is considerably more expensive. Their incomes are unreliable, and loans are likely necessary to cover necessities like food or clean water. Additional costs may be incurred because impoverished neighborhoods lack access to necessities and need to be purchased elsewhere, likely for a high price.<sup>103</sup> This can be seen in *Ganymede* when Captain Cly and Yaozu discuss what is left of the wrecked underground city of Seattle.

“[...]and I’ve discovered that Seattle is running perilously low on the basic necessities. Between you and me, Captain, I’m not sure how much longer the city can remain habitable. Such as it is.” “All that and more. We need canvas, lumber, charcoal for filters, coal for the furnaces, and that’s just the beginning.” He sighed. “Last week we ran out of coffee, and I thought the chemists would start an uprising.”<sup>104</sup>

The scarcity of supplies in a dangerous environment raises tension among the inhabitants, who turn on each other. Frequent supply runs are necessary and for a high price, only accessible from the wealthy mayor.

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<sup>102</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 91.

<sup>103</sup> Charlotte Lemanski, “Poverty: Multiple Perspectives and Strategies,” *Geography* 101, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 5–10.

<sup>104</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 28.

Further explained by Lewis, the culture of poverty is not defined only by the lack of finances. There are also social and psychological aspects of poverty worth mentioning. Urban spaces tend to be overpopulated, crowded, and unhygienic. The struggle to survive recurrently leads to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and excessive violence. These mechanisms impoverish the individual even further, as well as damage their physical and mental health.<sup>105</sup>

Such unhealthy coping mechanisms can be seen in *Boneshaker*, especially drug abuse. Its side effects are deadly but as the community further delves into despair, their need to escape reality rises. The easiest choice for them to deal with the horrors of reality is to take the drug, feel good for a moment and pass away. When Briar criticizes the drug because it kills people, Swakhammer justifies the usage by saying that “So do other people. So do dogs. So do angry horses, and diseases, and gangrene, and birthing babies.”<sup>106</sup> Those addicted to the drug do not see the possibility of dying as a reason to stop but rather as a possibly better way to pass away. Swakhammer is convinced that Lemon sap is not as harmful because the war kills much more, “It kills them by the score, and it kills more of them than the *Blight* does. More by thousands, I bet.”<sup>107</sup> The users are willing to run errands in a city overrun with zombies for a little bit more of the drug or perhaps scavenge the abandoned houses for valuables. They sneak inside and are “looking to steal or barter, or learn how to process the *Blight* for sap.”<sup>108</sup> At the other end of drug distributions stand those who sell. A seventeen-year-old boy named Rector is Lemon sap's biggest distributor in the Outskirts.<sup>109</sup> He lost both his parents in the tragedy, and to avoid poverty, he sells drugs to adults and other children.

Drug abuse is explored even further in *Dreadnought*, the first instance represented by injured soldiers lying in a military hospital. The soldiers turn to drug abuse to withstand and cope with the horrors of war, which are hard on their bodies and psyche. Those who ingest too much and have visible evidence of it, such as sores, yellow bags under the eyes, and the inability to talk, are regarded as a lost cause and treated last among the injured. Their condition is viewed as self-inflicted; therefore, even medical personnel have no sympathy for them.<sup>110</sup> When Mercy is asked to look over some patients with unexplainable illnesses, she recognizes the symptoms of drug abuse. These patients can barely speak, and when they can,

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<sup>105</sup> Lewis, “Culture and Poverty,” 312.

<sup>106</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 175.

<sup>107</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 175.

<sup>108</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 154.

<sup>109</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 52.

<sup>110</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 31.

they only say one thing: “Sap.” and “Need.”<sup>111</sup> The severe damage the drug does to the brain reduces them to only needing more of it, eventually losing their humanity and turning into flesh eating monsters.

Sympathies are not shared among social classes either. As said by Chambre, class conflicts are inevitable, as both struggle for power over resources and attempt to exploit and hold control over each other, whether to gain more or prevent losing any.<sup>112</sup> A great sense of divide is present among the classes, and antagonistic remarks are also seen in Priest’s novels. The class struggle is seen throughout *The Clockwork Century* every time the different classes are mentioned in a conversation in passing or whenever two characters of separate classes meet. The interactions range from sarcastic remarks to insults and violence. In such cases, we can speak of classism, discrimination, and prejudice, entirely based on which class a person happens to be born or simply is in.<sup>113</sup> These negative attitudes based on class can be seen from the lower class toward the upper class and vice versa. In *Dreadnought*, Mercy feels out of place in “[...] the rich car, where her fellow passengers were high-class ladies who’d never worked a day in their lives, with their trussed-up offspring and upturned noses.” As a Confederate military nurse with little to no funds left from her severance pay, Mercy feels that the ladies without the need to work are self-centered just because they sit in first class.<sup>114</sup>

In *Ganymede*, Josephine notes, “His accent leaned toward the higher-class end of the Texian spectrum. He sounded like he’d had an education someplace else, but exactly where, Josephine couldn’t pinpoint.”<sup>115</sup> This shows that class can be observed and judged simply from one’s accent, which is something most people have no control over. She made an assumption about the newcomer based on one sentence. An instance of negative attitude and critique of the wealthy can also be witnessed in *Ganymede*: “Instability? It was obscene to me, how much he could have done for this place—and how little interest he showed in doing so.” Yaozu expresses his frustration about the former employer and his disinterest and perhaps complete ignorance in helping the survivors of Seattle’s tragedy to stay alive and improve their inhospitable city, despite having more than enough means to do so. The citizens of Seattle are all struggling to live another day, and for all of them to prosper, the wealth must

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<sup>111</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 139.

<sup>112</sup> Henri Chambre and David T. McLellan, “Marxism - Class Struggle,” Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marxism/Class-struggle>.

<sup>113</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, “Classism,” Last accessed, December 21, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/classism>.

<sup>114</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 124-125.

<sup>115</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 76.

be redistributed to rebuild the city and reinforce protection against the zombies and poisonous gas.<sup>116</sup>

Raising above the poverty line can be challenging and seem impossible. As Liebow highlights in *Culture and Poverty*, many do not want to accept poverty and want to improve their situation. However, one of the main obstacles is that the poor are excluded from many institutions due to their lack of finances. Their opportunities are limited, as they are unlikely to get accepted into high-quality schools, have poor health due to the fact they cannot afford proper medical care and are unable to get hired by high-paying employers. This can make progress difficult and further reinforces the idea that escaping poverty is impossible. As their efforts are met with denial, those below the poverty line can lose hope entirely, accepting their situation as fatal.<sup>117</sup>

This sense of doom and acceptance of one's financial situation as final can be seen in *Boneshaker*. Briar and Ezekiel are described multiple times as malnourished and characterized as very poor by stating, "Do we look like we have any money?"<sup>118</sup> and that "(t)hose people, they were poor folks, like us."<sup>119</sup> Their living space is disheveled and bare, as well as their empty pantry. Both characters often go without eating, finding ways to cope with the hunger by distracting themselves or sleeping: "She was starving, but she was so often hungry that she had learned to think around it."<sup>120</sup>

While Briar accepts their situation as unchangeable, the young Ezekiel is unhappy with it and desires change. Briar's underpaid employment at the waterworks under dangerous conditions barely covers their bare necessities and tarnishes their reputation in their small community. While arguing with Ezekiel, she states her stance on illegal ways of earning money.

I realize that I don't make an honest day's work look very appealing;  
and I realize too that you think you've been cheated out of a better  
life, and I don't blame you. But here we are, and this is what we have.  
The circumstances have damned us both.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 30.

<sup>117</sup> Elliot Liebow, "Culture and Poverty," in *Anthropological Realities: Readings in the Science of Culture*, ed. Jeanne Guillemin (Transaction Publishers, 1980), 313-314.

<sup>118</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 31.

<sup>119</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 30.

<sup>120</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 34.

<sup>121</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 37.

Briar's fatalistic approach further illustrates how a difficult financial situation can smother one's hope for a better future. She does not wish to acquire income via illegal means as other people in the community have, as this is something she does not want to teach her son. She also acknowledges that she creates generational poverty and takes away opportunities from her son due to her poorness.

In *Dreadnought*, some citizens who were unable to obtain a steady source of income turned to illegal means of obtaining it. The main character, Mercy, and other airship passengers look down upon several men illegally distilling alcohol due to the lack of other sources of income. The government threatens to heavily tax alcohol production, which results in the *bootleggers* doing it in secret, in the forests, dangerously close to the front. To emphasize the government's preoccupation with the war, one of the passengers explains what lengths they go to, in order to collect the taxes:

“The local authorities—sheriffs, policemen, constables, or however the cities and townships are organized—they're given leave by the capital in Danville to pursue the moonshiners at a personal profit, provided they collect the unpaid taxes. It's been compared to privateering, and is approximately as popular as that old practice.”<sup>122</sup>

*Ganymede* shows further mention of turning to illegal activities due to denial of opportunities: "Why would you leave pirating? The only money anybody has anymore comes from working while the law isn't looking. We know that better than anyone, don't we, Ruthie?"<sup>123</sup> With The desperation of survival in awful conditions with the system seemingly working against the poor, it is hard to resist the opportunity to take a shortcut and stop obeying the law to improve the situation via illegal means. Josephine's prostitution is illegal but is often overlooked by law enforcement officers, and Cly's profession is piracy, which benefits other citizens of his walled-up city and himself. Josephine says it is difficult to make money in a way that obeys the law and suggests it would be unwise to leave Cly's illegal profession.

In *Ganymede*, the Texians impose a curfew because of a violent incident in New Orleans. "It's the curfew, closing us up. Costing all kinds of business, too—not that the Texians give a sainted cuss about it."<sup>124</sup> The Texians remain indifferent to how much a curfew

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<sup>122</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 66.

<sup>123</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 131.

<sup>124</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 123.

prohibits citizens from leaving their homes after a certain time. In those lost hours, more products and services could have been sold. Working-class people suffer the most losses, as they cannot afford to lose even the opportunity to get income.

It is also worth mentioning that denial of opportunities can also be found in the novel. One of the most crucial steps toward a high-paying job is quality education and experience. However, Ezekiel cannot achieve this because “in the aftermath, with so much of the population decimated or scattered, the teachers didn’t always stay.”<sup>125</sup> Even though Ezekiel is only fifteen<sup>126</sup>, he is not motivated to stay in school and rarely attends due to the poor quality of education provided.

It is not only the story’s main characters that comment on the Wilkes family’s financial situation. In the epilogue, their house is described as “a squat place, and gray like everything else around it.”<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, when Briar does not go to work for more than a week, she is “no longer employed at the plant,”<sup>128</sup> but nobody stole her belongings left at the plant, for she “didn’t have anything that anyone wanted.”<sup>129</sup> The Wilkes do not bother returning to their house after their perilous journey, for there is nothing to take from their empty pantry and bare home.

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<sup>125</sup>Priest, *Boneshaker*, 42.

<sup>126</sup>Priest, *Boneshaker*, 84.

<sup>127</sup>Priest, *Boneshaker*, 413.

<sup>128</sup>Priest, *Boneshaker*, 411.

<sup>129</sup>Priest, *Boneshaker*, 411.

### 3. POLLUTION AND THE PERILS OF WAR: UNRAVELING THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND BIOLOGICAL IMPACTS IN *THE CLOCKWORK CENTURY*

An overarching theme in *The Clockwork Century* is how war, technology, and the carelessness of the government led to the gradual decline of the quality of life in its alternate reality. The outcome of such behavior is pollution, which is interwoven into every aspect of the characters' lives, whether it is the air they breathe, earth they walk on, or water they drink. According to King, "Dangerous, heavy, polluting steampunk machines remind us constantly of the human and environmental damage wrought by rapid technological advance." Innovations pose new threats to the environment. Steampunk draws attention to the environmental hazard of mining and over usage of machines present. Furthermore, while some steampunk novels reimagine our history with "clean," environmentally conscious technology, most Steampunk novels imply that machines can only decimate and harm.<sup>130</sup>

In *The Clockwork Century*, the machines coexist with humans in an apparent disharmony, as they are more often than not used as war machines or cause damage to the environment as soon as they are turned on. While sentiments towards said machines differ vastly in each character, most argue that technology should be feared rather than celebrated. The tragedy in Seattle, which killed and traumatized many, was caused by the engine *Boneshaker*. Even just a memory of it jolts fear into the characters affected by the tragedy.

"And in her memory, the shocking, jolting, bashing fury of the Boneshaker machine was moving underneath her again, tearing down basement walls and gutting the underground, pummeling the rocks and digging, blasting, destroying everything it touched. . . . She wasn't the only one thinking it, she knew. Everyone thought of it, every time another quake wiggled the land."<sup>131</sup>

The engine significantly damaged the environment of a whole city, killing animals and people in its wake, resulting in the deadly gas being released and nationwide poisoning. In *The Inexplicables*, the aftermath of the tragedy is described as a "[...] city rotted inside its wall, dissolving and decaying in the heavy, poisonous gas [...]," as well as comparing the city

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<sup>130</sup> Edward King and Joanna Page, *Posthumanism and the Graphic Novel in Latin America* (Ucl Press, 2017), 110-115.

<sup>131</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 76.



to a skeleton.<sup>132</sup> A skeleton usually serves as an outer reinforced shell that protects what is inside, which as a description of the town, could mean that while the wall still stands, what remains inside has eroded or disappeared.

In *Dreadnought*, various opinions on machines' age and usage can be examined. When Mercy is asked if she is happy about the invention of new technology, she says: "Most of the marvels I've seen are doing a marvelous job of blowing men to bits [...]"<sup>133</sup> This sentiment is a consequence of Mercy only witnessing the aftermath of such machinery being used. As a nurse, she sees what technology does when used as a weapon while soldiers are dying underneath her hands. For Mercy, it would be challenging to see weapons as something to be liked or fascinated by. The traveler she discusses her opinions with does not share her sentiment and is rather intrigued by what human hands can build, even though the machines can be misused. He associates technology with the nation's progress and applauds long-distance travel as "more comfortable" and "more commonplace."<sup>134</sup> Mercy stands her ground and notes that many airships, now used for civilian travel, are only in use because they would be discarded otherwise; therefore, more technology used by civilians, not soldiers, is not a sign of progress. "It's a side effect of war, that's all. These ships were first built for the fronts, but the damn things can't go more than a few hundred miles without refilling, and they can't hardly carry any weight at all."<sup>135</sup> This further shows that most new machines are only being built for military purposes, to win the Civil War, and then introduced as new technology for civilians.

"The hydrogen's flammable [...], and that don't work so good with live ammunition flying all over the place. Not a month after the first dirigibles took to the front, antiaircraft guns were up and running, shooting them down carnival balloons."<sup>136</sup> Mercy delves into why precisely the ships were put for civilian use, and it becomes clear that the machines were too deadly to be used in the war. They did not want to get rid of the devices and waste them but using them as means of transportation when the ships could be detonated any minute creates an unsafe environment for ordinary people traveling.

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<sup>132</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 49.

<sup>133</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 58.

<sup>134</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 57-58.

<sup>135</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 58.

<sup>136</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 58.

The second novel of *The Clockwork Century* is centred around a train *Dreadnought*, which instils immense fear into people just by uttering its name. At one point, a soldier who encountered it during combat called it an “unholy engine,”<sup>137</sup> suggesting how powerful the war train must be, drastically shifting the power balance on the battlefield. Another soldier recounts the events of battle: “That thing tore right through our blockades like they were made of pie dough. Killed a score every half a mile. Eventually we just had to let them have it.”<sup>138</sup> The machine can change the tide of the war with little to no effort, causing significant casualties anywhere it goes. The comparison of soldiers to “pie dough” suggests how overwhelming the weapon's strength is, evoking a sense of despair, fear, and impending defeat.

Further in the novel, more opinions on the *Dreadnought* are expressed. A citizen from Fort Chattanooga notes that it is “the biggest, meanest engine they could imagine, and then they trussed it up with enough armor and artillery to be a real war machine.” Consequently, his employee rebuts the notion that it is a “monster.” His employer says that it is not a monster but a “fine piece of engineering,” but also that it is “only an engine,”<sup>139</sup> which suggests that while the employer does agree with the power of the machine and that its cruel usage is against the soldiers of his nation and is somewhat fascinated by the technology that was used to create it, he does not see the true danger it poses, for it is only a machine to him and engines are not more powerful than men. Mercy is forced to board the train later on, and when she sees it, it instills a great sense of fear in her, but she tries to rationalize her feelings by telling herself that “the engine is frightful because it’s an instrument of war. On the other hand, it was designed quite deliberately to make people afraid.”<sup>140</sup> Mercy is more than familiar with instruments of war and their effects as a nurse, so she is trying to see it from another point of view, and that is design and engineering. She evaluates the features and capabilities of the machine, as well as its appearance, which made her frightful in the first place. Mercy realizes that just by seeing the train in the distance, the viewer is supposed to be afraid, demoralized, and intimidated by it, using psychology against him.

Both sides of the war built so-called “walkers”, which are “[...] shaped like a real big man, with a pair of men inside it. [...] [A]nd once you’re inside it, not even a direct artillery hit—at real close range—will bring you down” The Confederate *walkers* run on diesel and

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<sup>137</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 85.

<sup>138</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 84.

<sup>139</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 117.

<sup>140</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 154-155.

Union *walkers* on steam. This makes a big difference in the way these machines can be used. While diesel-powered *walkers* can be used for a long time, if the soldiers have ammunition, Union's steam-powered *walkers* "[...] move all right, but they run so hot, they can't keep pace with ours, not for very long. Not without cooking the men who ride inside 'em."<sup>141</sup> This significant drawback of steam-powered machines poses a significant safety hazard to the soldiers operating them inside. As the machine is used, the movement and usage create excessive heat during prolonged use. The soldier describing the differences between walkers implies that technological progress should be associated with making machines better at performance and safer to use without jeopardizing the personnel needed to run them.

In *Ganymede*, a submarine of the same name, is placed at the center of the plot. Josephine needs to find a pilot reckless enough to drive a submarine, which has killed several previous captains.

All she needed was a pilot willing to risk his life in a machine that had killed seventeen men to date; brave the Mississippi River as it went past Forts Jackson and Saint Philip and all the attending Rebels and Texians therein; and kindly guide it out into the Gulf of Mexico past half a dozen Confederate warships—all the while knowing the thing could explode, suffocate everyone inside, or sink to the ocean bottom at any moment.<sup>142</sup>

Numerous dangers and risks are involved in this task and some uncertainties because of the lack of data to uncover what those previous captains did wrong because they did not live long enough to note the cause. The machine is supposed to turn the tide of the war, and "change everything."<sup>143</sup> The mission is more important than the lives it might take during it. The potential of *Ganymede* is enormous because of its concealment under water. "[...] hidden and powerful, able to destroy ships from the Gulf or the Atlantic without having ever been seen. It could end the war. Maybe the simple threat of it could do so."<sup>144</sup> The enormous and powerful machine hidden from sight ensures that the psychological aspect of war brings a significant advantage against the opponents. *Ganymede* has the element of surprise and stealth, which induces paranoia and fear that it might strike at any moment. Later in the novel, *Ganymede* does cause significant destruction to the enemy's ships, the remnants of which

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<sup>141</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 100.

<sup>142</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 12.

<sup>143</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 20.

<sup>144</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 42.

pollute the bayou's canals. The canals are already polluted from previous battles. Captain Cly observes the debris beneath the surface: "They showed only sediment and trash, wagon wheels and the bones of dead things tossed into the canal and forgotten."<sup>145</sup> Nobody dived in the canals to retrieve the waste, and it lies there to decompose and pollute on its own. The *Ganymede* moves into battle, and the damage stuns those on board as the first round of ammunition is fired from the submarine. The boat, which received the blow, "started to sink in a pair of ragged pieces," and "[d]oors, flooring planks, shutters, and boxes bobbed below [...]"<sup>146</sup> This is the moment when the captain and his crew first realize just how much power they have in their hands and that they are responsible for the death of a whole ship's crew. When the battle ends, most ships are on the canal's bottom or ocean floor and may never be retrieved again. The *Ganymede's* crew watches as "the nasty remnants were dumped into the ocean—where everything eventually rusts, or warps [...]"<sup>147</sup> While the battle had to be fought, and nothing could prevent the wreckage it would leave, it is important to note how much pollution such a battle caused within a few hours.

The *rotters*, which fill the city's walls, are the evidence of how many people the gas took, and animal corpses are also seen in the first novel. Briar not only lands in a pile of dead birds<sup>148</sup> but also encounters "dismembered and long decayed corpses of horses and dogs" in the streets of Seattle.<sup>149</sup> While animals did die due to being crushed or starved, they did not get killed by the *Blight*, but it did affect them in other ways. Some still reside within the walls, sick with *Blight* poisoning, which turns their eyes orange and makes them infertile.<sup>150</sup> The birds affected by the infection are described as "sluggish and slow,"<sup>151</sup> and a sick fox appears similar to a *rotter*, in a crouch, snarling, sickly.<sup>152</sup> Unlike infected humans, the disease does not shut the animal's brain off, and it can still have a mind of its own.

Priest comments on the destruction of nature in a very different way in *Jacaranda*, where pollution is not caused by gas but by humans themselves. The story talks of an ancient tree, a blue Jacaranda, which was cut down to erect a highly profitable hotel. The tree takes revenge on the hotel's inhabitants and "cleanses" them of their sins by slaughtering them.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 230-231.

<sup>146</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 243.

<sup>147</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 262.

<sup>148</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 114.

<sup>149</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 136.

<sup>150</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 82.

<sup>151</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 163.

<sup>152</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 165.

<sup>153</sup> Cherie Priest, *Jacaranda* (Burton, Mi: Subterranean Press, 2015).

This implies nature being its own entity and having the desire to fight back against environmental damage.

In *The Inexplicables*, Rector traverses the city and characterizes the environment as “gray with a hint of sickly green, for even the ever-present mold and mildew took its cues from the *Blight*-tainted air.” It can be said that the gradual decay forms an appearance of lifelessness or disease. As he explores further, the paths are blocked by debris, broken tree roots, dead grass, and human litter.<sup>154</sup> The landscape of Seattle has become a desolate and depressing place, nature within the walls could not withstand the gas, and not much of it is left. Most of nature’s remnants are dead, rotting, decomposing, slowly withering away, and turning into organic waste.

Trees that had once been mighty were now reduced to crumbling trunks, and the odd monument or piece of statuary had gone streaked and pitted from prolonged exposure to the gas. To the left they saw curving walkways with seams that had succumbed to rubble, and a large round pond with nothing inside it but a yellow-black muck. They noticed signs that had gone unreadable, the paint blistered to illegibility and the colors bleached to an ugly gold. Running through all this wreckage were paths that were once graceful, veering prettily between patches of manicured lawns and gardens, and were now uniform in their unkempt ugliness—though they retained their expensive, precise shapes. Nothing could grow in the *Blight* gas, and therefore nothing became overgrown. It could only rot where once it had thrived.<sup>155</sup>

Even the once majestic trees are only shells of themselves, and materials like stone and metal crumble away with time. Water turns into abhorrent yellow and black slimy substance inside the once beautiful pond. As the *Blight* thwarts new flora from growing, no weeds can fill the once well-kept properties. It is implied that until the gas is sealed away, there is no hope to fix or cleanse the city. The scene provides a sense of contrast to how much has changed and how much damage the pollution has caused and warns against the consequences of pollution if left unchecked.

Human remains are also seen throughout the streets: “At Angeline’s feet, they saw legs, arms, and half a dozen heads lying motionless and scattered. And behind her, creeping into a gruesome drift as high as her waist, a pile of dismembered undead oozed, dripped, and settled into a heap of viscous mulch.”<sup>156</sup> The victims’ bodies are left on the dirty streets and

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<sup>154</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 39.

<sup>155</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 215.

<sup>156</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 94.

are not given proper burial, as it is too dangerous to walk on the ground, and traversal is only somewhat safe on rooftops. Litter is seen throughout the novel, such as “broken bottles, discarded rags, and a stray shoe”<sup>157</sup>, which is unlikely to be picked up and disposed of, as just traversing the city is very dangerous. The litter is a grim reminder of what life was like in Seattle before the tragedy.

The main source of air pollution in *The Clockwork century* is not from machines but from gas. The poisonous gas *Blight*, which slowly emerges from Seattle’s shattered earth, is the cause of the zombie apocalypse, as well as respiratory issues and the whole remaining population of Seattle has to retreat underground into sealed chambers, where gas cannot reach. Their air supply is solved by pumping clean from outside the wall air with the help of long steel air tubes, which are very dependable and durable “[e]xcept when the ceiling caves in.”<sup>158</sup> The gas is theorized to be oozing from a volcano, but it is only a speculation. As Lucy tells Briar about Minnericht: “[...] volcanoes make poison gas, and if they don’t spew it out, it stays underground. Unless something breaks through and lets it out.”<sup>159</sup>

The threat of the gas escaping outside the walls is an ever-present threat that worries many characters, who do everything they can to prevent it. They realize that the leak will happen someday, and the consequences will be catastrophic. As said in *The Inexplicables*, “It’d poison the whole earth, given time enough to leak.”<sup>160</sup> Later in the story, the gas does spill outside of the walls because it was deliberately breached. “They’re poisoning the woods, everything in ’em, and anybody who passes through ’em.”<sup>161</sup> The complete and utter disregard for the safety of those living in the *Outskirts*, right beside the wall, causes the woods to be the first to feel the effects of the *Blight*. To the outsiders, the danger of it is only a distant memory, and they presume it must no longer be dangerous. They unknowingly expose nature and animals to harmful substances and pollute an area protected by everyone’s collective efforts for a decade.

As war presses on and tensions rise, small battles emerge within the distinctive territories, separate from The Civil War. The pirates use a bay called *Barataria* for their ships in the marshes but get attacked by the Confederacy. Captain Cly wants to see how much carnage the battle has done. “And as for Barataria, I don’t blame you for wanting to come take

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<sup>157</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 54.

<sup>158</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 110.

<sup>159</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 259.

<sup>160</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 24.

<sup>161</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 207.

a look. It left a big ol' hole in the marsh, didn't it?"<sup>162</sup> Because *Barataria* is in the middle of a bayou, the battle to gain power over the location results in the destruction of the natural swamp. Even though the bayou is quite humid and damp, the ginormous ships shooting at each other destroy the vegetation, animals, and ecosystems which reside there.

The gas also affects visibility. it is mentioned multiple times that *Blight* creates permanent fog and shade and limits sunlight; consequently, nothing grows in the city. As an exception, in elevated places, where the gas is thinner, cherries grow but are described as tasting "funny."<sup>163</sup> In *The Inexplicables*, the air is described "milky white"<sup>164</sup> and "so hard to see anything that isn't right in front of your face"<sup>165</sup> The fog warps perception and limits awareness, making it challenging and dangerous to live inside the walls. Sunlight is difficult to see through the fog and miasma, "Northwest had many days when the sun rose but nobody saw it, courtesy of the cloud layer. The compressed fog of the *Blight* exaggerated this gloom, filtering every scrap of light and turning it to murk."<sup>166</sup> The natural light cannot penetrate the fog and a layer of clouds, which disorients the inhabitants and creates a gloomy atmosphere.

In *The Clockwork Century* series, the gas does not evaporate or escape into the air because it is "heavy, [...] like soup"<sup>167</sup>, pools inside the walls, and easily dilapidates buildings and objects. It can be compared to *sulfur dioxide*, typically "released directly into the atmosphere by volcanoes, or formed as the oxidation product of the dimethyl sulphide released by oceanic phytoplankton."<sup>168</sup> However, the two gases can be compared only when it comes to their source, not effects, as *Blight* turns humans into carnivorous zombies, and *sulfur* does not. The gas is a highly acidic and corrosive substance that poisons anything, even the water supply, next to the Seattle wall.

"The Blight gas had poisoned the natural systems until the creeks and streams flowed almost yellow with contagion. Even the near- constant patter of rain could not be trusted. The clouds that dropped it may have gusted past the walled- up city and absorbed enough toxin to wash skin raw and bleach paint."<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 120.

<sup>163</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 85.

<sup>164</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 60.

<sup>165</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 84.

<sup>166</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 93.

<sup>167</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 243.

<sup>168</sup> Jeremy Colls, *Air Pollution* (London ; New York: Spon Press, 2002), 33.

<sup>169</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*.

This is another inconsistency with sulfur dioxide, which does not make water undrinkable and is generally deemed safe to drink. Sulfur is a common contaminant in public water supply, only acting as a temporary laxative if ingested in larger quantities.<sup>170</sup>

In *Boneshaker*, *Blight* can be “[...] boiled away; it could be filtered and steamed and filtered again. And after seventeen hours of treatment, the water could be safely consumed.”<sup>171</sup> While a solution to the contaminated water supply exists and the water is safe to drink after the treatment, it does not eliminate the taste. In *The Inexplicables*, it is described as having dreadful taste and smell alike, and “it never tasted as fresh as a mountain stream ... or even outhouse runoff.”<sup>172</sup> The water supply is so tainted that it cannot be restored to its original taste or even made to taste somewhat decent. The underground city has its tavern, which serves its own kind of alcohol, “[...] distilled from *Blight*-contaminated water, and though it was safe to drink, it was rarely anyone’s first choice. Or second. Occasionally, it came in third.”<sup>173</sup> The water pollution is severe, but the contaminated water is the only one they have. Even though it tastes terrible, they drink it to at least dull their senses to cope with their quality of life.

As said before, *Blight* is highly acidic and corrosive, evident from how Seattle looks after being exposed to it for years. The whole city is slowly sinking as *Blight* corrodes everything it touches. The damage it is causing is described in various ways, as well as the hopelessness and resignation connected with the inability to fix a city slowly crumbling down. “It looks like an explosion out there, and [...] who would take the time to fix it? We’ve got better things to do down here, and we surely don’t have the filters or the manpower for it. So all that debris, and all those toppled and sunken old buildings, they just sit there and crumble.”<sup>174</sup> The lack of resources and manpower to clean Seattle leaves it to deteriorate and further pollute the environment. The lack of maintenance on buildings makes them dangerous to approach and cave-ins are a regular occurrence.<sup>175</sup> The gas not only deteriorates what it touches, it also leaves a yellow sticky residue, which is difficult to wash off, and

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<sup>170</sup> Sharon O. Skipton, Wayne E Woldt, and Bruce I. Dvorak, “Drinking Water: Sulfur (Sulfate and Hydrogen Sulfide),” *NebGuide*, January 20, 2010, 2-4.

<sup>171</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 45.

<sup>172</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 75.

<sup>173</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 27.

<sup>174</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*, 295.

<sup>175</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 140.



unfortunately, all equipment used outside must be properly scrubbed afterward to prevent infection.<sup>176</sup>

In *Ganymede*, Yaozu describes *Blight* as a “punishing, brutal substance,”<sup>177</sup> which implies the gas itself has a mind of its own and aims to harm with full force but also sees potential in it. He runs a drug operation that sells *Sap* to make money for rebuilding the city of Seattle. Therefore, there is hope for the citizens at least to utilize the presence of the gas to their benefit.

However, such hope is hard to hold onto, as *Blight* can fall into the wrong hand and be misused, similarly to a chemical or a biological weapon. Historically, chemical and biological weaponry has been used in warfare to gain the upper hand in combat.<sup>178</sup> Chemical weapons use toxic chemicals to inflict harm, unlike biological weapons, which use living organisms, such as viruses, toxins, or fungi. Biological weapons mainly use different diseases to overcome their victims.<sup>179</sup> Some examples include pathogens, such as smallpox,<sup>180</sup> and toxins, such as botulinum toxin.<sup>181</sup> They can cause illnesses that spread rapidly and can leave long-term health complications or death.

According to Greenfield, chemical agents affect the body in different ways. The chemicals can be “blood agents,” such as cyanide, “nerve agents,” sarin, “choking agents,” chlorine gas, etc. Some paralyze, poison, have flammable properties, or create blisters. These weapons cause severe injuries and death. Some notable uses of such weapons were during the first world war, “chlorine, phosgene, and sulfur mustard” were used in combat. One of the most infamous cases of chemicals being used as weapons was in the second world war when Germans implemented the usage of “hydrogen cyanide”, which was used in gas chambers.<sup>182</sup>

The first notion of chemical and biological weapons being relevant to the world Cherie Priest created becomes apparent in Seattle. A walled-up city filled with poisonous gas and no humanitarian help in sight. The citizens were forgotten, abandoned, and left to their

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<sup>176</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 116.

<sup>177</sup> Priest, *Ganymede*, 30.

<sup>178</sup> Borden Institute Walter Reed Army Medical Center Washington, D. C., *Medical Aspects of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, ed. Frederick R. Sidell, Ernest T. Takafuji, and David R. Franz (Falls Church, Va.: Office Of The Surgeon General, U.S. Army ; Washington, Dc, 2008), 12.

<sup>179</sup> Borden Institute Walter Reed Army Medical Center Washington, D. C., *Medical Aspects*, 20-25.

<sup>180</sup> Borden Institute Walter Reed Army Medical Center Washington, D. C., *Medical Aspects*, 27.

<sup>181</sup> Borden Institute Walter Reed Army Medical Center Washington, D. C., *Medical Aspects*, 497.

<sup>182</sup> Ronald A. Greenfield et al., “Microbiological, Biological, and Chemical Weapons of Warfare and Terrorism,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 323, no. 6 (June 1, 2002): 326-327.  
<https://doi.org/10.1097/00000441-200206000-00005>.

own devices.<sup>183</sup> The zombie virus, which comes from *Blight* poisoning, can be interpreted as a biological weapon, as the *rotters* are mindless creatures that attack on sight and, therefore, can be misused. In *The Inexplicables*, Yaozu is seen enacting punishment to his workers by sending them outside of the safety of an underground tunnel, eventually leading to them getting either torn apart or contracting the disease and becoming members of the mindless horde.<sup>184</sup>

In *Dreadnought*, an “airship was carrying *Blight* concentrate for processing down in Mexico. It crashed right on top of people, and turned them.”<sup>185</sup> The consequences of the crash are severe and cause 500 soldiers to become *rotters*.<sup>186</sup> The sudden catastrophe illustrates how quickly and potent the gas acts when not handled in a safe environment. The danger of mishandling the toxic substance causes stark contamination and destruction, as it affects not only the people but also fertile land, animals, water, and air. It is unclear whether it was truly an accident, or a planned attack to weaken the Mexican army. Either way, it achieved results similar to the usage of chemical and also biological weapons.

The *Blight* can also be interpreted as a chemical weapon in the sense of polluting the water supply and fertile land and biological in the sense of the zombie virus, which spreads further and carries it around the country. A direct mention of the gas being weaponized is by Miss Clay, “something that could alter so many hundreds of people all at once would make a tremendous weapon,” after which Mercy retorts with, “Turning a disease or a poison into a weapon? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”<sup>187</sup> This shows that while it is not weaponized yet, even civilians can imagine what could happen if the gas fell into the wrong hands. The prospect of a disease being weaponized is illustrated by Miss Clay: “During the French and Indian war, the government gave smallpox-infected blankets to hostile tribes. It was cheaper and easier than exterminating them”<sup>188</sup> She draws similarities between the zombie virus and smallpox, a disease used as a biological weapon. The character theorizes what it would be like to wield such a weapon, “But the problem with an unseen contagion is obvious, ain’t it? You’re gonna infect your own folks with it, sure as you infect other people.”<sup>189</sup> The risk of

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<sup>183</sup> Priest, *Boneshaker*.

<sup>184</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 207-208.

<sup>185</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 258.

<sup>186</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 156.

<sup>187</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 267.

<sup>188</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 267.

<sup>189</sup> Priest, *Dreadnought*, 267.

using a weapon that is invisible to the naked eye is tremendous. It is perhaps too dangerous to handle, let alone carry it all the way from Seattle into the war zone.

The threat of a biological weapon being used hangs over the character's heads in *The Inexplicables*, when there is talk of "The Union has plans to make his nasty powder into a weapon, and if they take too long at it, I'm sure the Confederates will try it for themselves."<sup>190</sup> The question is no longer if the weapon will be made, but when.

In *Fiddlehead*, a weapon's prototype is to be sold to accelerate the war's ending because a "disease can turn the tide of a war more easily than strategy."<sup>191</sup> Even though the weapon is extremely dangerous, unethical and much about it remains unknown, especially the "extent of the damage" because "there's no research to say that it won't poison the land for a thousand years,"<sup>192</sup> the thought of the war coming to its end tempts both sides of the war to consider buying it. The weapon is a gas bomb, made from *Blight*, essentially only releasing gas into an area and letting the soldiers kill each other after becoming *rotters*. The bomb is supposed to be "[o]ne hundred percent effective, both as a killing agent and as a psychological weapon,"<sup>193</sup> which implies that only the thought of one side of the war having this weapon in possession might lead to their victory. The gas "takes over their nervous system and makes them into mindless cannibals. They turn on their fellow men, spreading the contagion while seeding terror."<sup>194</sup> The horror of fellow soldiers turning into monsters is enough to spread terror through the ranks of the opposing side.

In conclusion, Priest illustrates how chemical and biological weaponry can be tempting to use to achieve victory. However, the disastrous effects the usage of such a weapon poses, both for the immediate civilian population, the environment, and the world at large, do not justify its employment by the military.

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<sup>190</sup> Priest, *The Inexplicables*, 348-349.

<sup>191</sup> Cherie Priest, *Fiddlehead*. (Macmillan, 2016), 34.

<sup>192</sup> Priest, *Fiddlehead*, 30.

<sup>193</sup> Priest, *Fiddlehead*, 115.

<sup>194</sup> Priest, *Fiddlehead*, 116.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis explored problems of 20th and 21st century through an analytic lens in the context of alternate history in the selected works of Cherie Priest. The first chapter provides Priest's unique portrayal of *rotters*, mindless zombies created by contaminated water and air. These zombies evoke feelings of unease, fear, and sorrow among the characters, as they were once their loved ones. The novels raise questions about the dignity and respect that should be afforded to these unwilling zombies. *The Clockwork Century* novels also exemplify the genre of alternate history. In this alternate version of events, the American Civil War extended until 1880, with the Confederacy gaining recognition as an independent country. Historical events and outcomes diverge, and the novels present steam-powered war machines, environmental catastrophes, and the zombie apocalypse as integral parts of this altered history.

The second chapter explores the themes of feminism and class discrimination through the female characters and the societal dynamics in the fictional worlds. The female protagonists align with the feminist ideology, and challenge traditional gender roles and expectations, demonstrating agency and strength in the face of adversity. They are not defined solely by their relationships with men and do not conform to stereotypical feminine norms. The women in Priest's novels resist being defined by men's actions and strive to forge their own paths. They exhibit strength, independence, and skills typically associated with men. These characters challenge societal norms and expectations, showcasing that women can be powerful and capable in their own right.

Regarding class discrimination, Priest's novels portray a society undergoing economic and technological changes, resulting in a division between those who benefit from progress and those who do not. The urban poor face numerous challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, and basic necessities and the prevalence of unhealthy coping mechanisms such as drug abuse and violence. This reflects the real-world dynamics of class inequality and the challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Illegal activities become an enticing option for some in desperate situations, as legal means of earning a living become increasingly elusive. The novels portray instances of bootlegging, prostitution, and piracy as alternative sources of income for those who feel trapped in poverty. Desperation drives individuals to break the law, further perpetuating the cycle of poverty and reinforcing negative societal perceptions. The novels shed light on the

multifaceted nature of poverty and the detrimental impact of inequality. They serve as a reminder that economic and technological progress can often leave behind marginalized communities, and systemic changes are necessary to address poverty and create a more equitable society.

The third chapter explores the themes of pollution and biological weaponry. In this steampunk universe, pollution takes various forms, including air pollution, water pollution, and the decay of the environment caused by the machines and their aftermath. The dangerous and polluting nature of steampunk machines serves as a reminder of the human and environmental damage caused by rapid technological advancement. While some steampunk novels imagine a cleaner and more environmentally conscious technology, *The Clockwork Century* portrays machines as sources of harm and destruction. The machine used to illustrate the dangers of technology is the engine called *Boneshaker*, a prominent example of how machines in this world cause environmental damage. Its destructive power devastated an entire city, killing people and releasing a deadly gas that poisoned the nation. The city is described as rotted and decaying, and the pollution from the engine's destruction pollutes the surroundings. The aftermath of *Boneshaker's* rampage exemplifies the environmental hazards associated with the overuse and misuse of machines.

The *Dreadnought*, a war train, is another machine that instills fear and signifies the destructive power of technology. It effortlessly plows through blockades and causes significant casualties, symbolizing the imbalanced power dynamics on the battlefield. In *Ganymede*, a submarine, pollution takes the form of wreckage left behind after battles. The submarine's power and stealth give it an advantage in warfare, but the resulting wreckage and debris contribute to pollution in the bayou's canals and the ocean. The novel emphasizes the environmental impact of battles and the pollution they generate within a short period. The *Blight*, a deadly gas, is another form of pollution in the series. It affects humans and animals, leaving them sick. The gas and its effects create a desolate and decaying landscape where nature is dying, trees crumble, and the environment becomes lifeless and disease-ridden.

Pollution is a recurring theme in *The Clockwork Century*, depicting the negative consequences of war, technology, and human negligence on the environment and quality of life. The series highlights the need to consider the environmental impact of technological advancements and the importance of responsible use to prevent further degradation.

## RESUMÉ

Steampunk, žánr charakterizovaný nostalgií, akčním dobrodružstvím a bizarními vynálezy, zaujme čtenáře i módní nadšence. *Mechanické století* je steampunková série románů zasazená do alternativní historie, která inspiruje k úžasu nad možnostmi mimo naši realitu. Steampunková literatura však také slouží jako zrcadlo odrážející obavy dnešní doby. Tato práce si klade za cíl prozkoumat a analyzovat problematiku 20. a 21. století a zasadit je do kontextu alternativních dějin zobrazených v románech série Cherie Priest, která vedla k oživení žánru steampunk.

V teoretické části tato práce pojímá o vnímání populární fikce v akademické sféře. Murphy a Matterson tvrdí, že populární fikce, často vnímána jako „komerční fikce“, má spíše účel pobavit než účel akademický. Žánr se však vyvinul a stírá hranice mezi „komerčními“ a „literárními“ díly. Autoři jako Stephen King, Gillian Flynn a Colson Whitehead ukázali, že populární fikce má své místo v literárním světě zaslouženě. *Mechanické století* spadá pod žánr populární beletrie. Kombinuje prvky steampunku a westernu, čímž vytváří jedinečný román s hybridním žánrem.

První kapitola této práce poskytuje literární a historický přehled primárních textů, počínaje vývojem žánru Zombie. Zkoumá vznik žánru jako nezávislého nad rámec hororu a sci-fi, s důrazem na témata nadřazenosti lidské rasy a zkoumání lidské identity. Dále je představen pojem *Tisňové údolí*, který odkazuje na znepokojující pocit způsobený setkáním s humanoidními, ale ne zcela lidskými entitami. Kapitola také pojednává o konceptu *rotterů*, rozkládajících se zombie postavami, které jsou důsledkem nákazy jedovatým plynem. Kapitola zdůrazňuje emocionální dopad zombie na postavy v románu, protože střety se zombie způsobují pocity neklidu, strachu a smutku.

Kapitola pak představuje žánr alternativní historie, který si představuje historické události se změněnými následky. Žánr vyzývá čtenáře, aby přehodnotili své chápání světa manipulací známých historických příběhů. V příběhu *Mechanického století* technologické pokroky prodloužily americkou občanskou válku až do roku 1880, což má za následek nezávislou Konfederaci. Příběh zahrnuje pozměněné historické prvky, jako je zrušení otroctví, které se odehraje mnohem dříve. Válečné stroje poháněné párou, ekologické katastrofy a zombie apokalypsa dále formují alternativní dějiny. Kapitola zkoumá historický kontext románů, včetně příčin občanské války a vítězství severních států kvůli námořním

silám, počtu vojáků a finančním zdrojům. Mimo jiné se kapitola zajímá o téma ruské kolonizace v Severní Americe, zejména na Aljašce a severozápadním Pacifiku. Vysvětluje, jak se expedice vyvinuly do ruských osad, poháněných obchodem s kožešinami. Nicméně, vzhledem k vysokým nákladům na údržbu, Aljaška byla prodána Spojeným státům v roce 1867. Koncem 19. století byla objevením zlata na území západního Yukonu vyvolána zlatá horečka. Migrace hledačů zlata, často špatně připravených na drsné prostředí, vedla k početným ztrátám na životě nejen horníků ale i členů Indiánských kmenů, které byly během zlaté horečky vykořisťovány pro své území a umírali na onemocnění, které horníci přinesli.

Druhá kapitola se věnuje analýze problémů 20. a 21. století zobrazených v steampunkových románech Cherie Priest. Klade tyto problémy do kontextu alternativní historie a zaměřuje se především na feminismus a třídní diskriminaci a nespravedlnost. První část kapitoly ilustruje feministické hnutí, což je politické hnutí, které bojuje za rovná práva a příležitosti pro všechny pohlaví, a zaměřuje se na odstraňování genderových rolí, nerovností a tyranie na základě pohlaví. Feminismus je zastoupen v literatuře, filmové tvorbě a dalších odvětvích umění, aby reprezentoval a zkoumal zkušenosti a výzvy žen. Hnutí se šíří napříč prózou, poezií a činohrou. Literatura která je považovaná za feministickou zkoumá identitu, nerovnosti, genderové role a další aspekty života žen prostřednictvím literárního formátu. Světy fantazie a sci-fi umožňují alternativní reality, které odrážejí feministickou ideologii, i když někdy dosahují světů utopických nebo zobrazují světy, které zcela postrádají feminismus. Tyto práce mohou sloužit jako motivace nebo inspirace o tom, co by budoucnost mohla čekat všechna pohlaví, nebo jako varovné příběhy o tom, co by se mohlo stát, kdyby byla odňata práva určitého pohlaví.

Vybrané romány obsahují rozmanité ženské postavy se širokým zastoupením žen různého věku, rasy, třídy a povolání. Hrdinky, které Priest vytvořila opouštějí tradiční role žen v domácnosti a matek a vrhají se do vzrušujících, dobrodružných, a hlavně nebezpečných dobrodružství. Nechtějí pouze stát v pozadí děje nebo být kárány o tom, jak se chovat, zatímco se akce děje kolem nich. Ženy zobrazeny ve vybraných románech pomáhají, kde mohou, a ujmou se vedení, když si myslí, že je to třeba. Jsou postavami, které posouvají děj příběhu tam, kam má jít.

Druhá část poskytuje přehled o třídní diskriminaci a ekonomických nerovnostech a analyzuje zobrazení postav, které čelí ekonomickým výzvám v nebezpečném světě sužovaném válkou, zombie a nebezpečnými stroji. V *Zemětřasu* vláda zanedbává potřeby

těch, kteří ztratili vše v destrukci Seattlu a propuknutí zombie apokalypsy. Pozornost je kladena spíše na probíhající občanskou válku a ponechává občany na pospas osudu. Podobně v *Ganymédu* se bohatí v New Orleansu těší lepšími životními podmínkami, zatímco doky, které zaměstnávají chudé a zoufalé jedince, postrádají řádnou regulaci a bezpečnost. Městská chudina čelí znevýhodnění během hospodářských změn v důsledku vyšších životních nákladů a omezených příležitostí. Chudé čtvrti často postrádají přístup k nezbytnostem, což nutí obyvatele platit vyšší ceny. V *Ganymédu* vyvolává nedostatek zásob ve zničeném městě Seattle napětí mezi obyvateli, což vede ke konfliktům. Chudoba není jen o finanční deprivaci, ale má také sociální a psychologické aspekty. Městské prostory mají tendenci být přeplněné a nehygienické, což vede k nezdravým kompenzačním mechanismům, jako je alkoholismus, zneužívání drog a násilí. V *Zemětrasu* se zneužívání drog stává velkým problémem a slouží jak vojákům ve válce, tak obyčejným lidem jako prostředek k útěku před hrůzami reality. Závislí jsou ochotni riskovat život, a to i ve městě přeplněném zombie, aby získali drogu. Distribuce drog často padá do rukou zranitelných jedinců, jako je sedmnáctiletý chlapec Rektor. Třídní konflikty a negativní postoje založené na třídě jsou nevyhnutelné. Třídní boj je patrný v celé sérii románů, s interakcemi mezi různými třídami, které obsahují sarkastické poznámky, urážky a násilí. Předsudky a diskriminace na základě společenské třídy jsou přítomny v obou směrech. Romány obecně zdůrazňují nerovnoměrné rozdělení dávek v době změn, dopad chudoby na jednotlivce a komunity a výzvy, kterým čelí chudí při převratech v technologiích a ekonomie.

Třetí a poslední kapitola se noří do environmentálních a biologických dopadů zobrazených v románech. Zkoumá propojení mezi znečištěním a biologickými a chemickými zbraněmi a slouží jako varovná připomínka důsledků vyplývajících z války, nedbalosti a technologie. Znečištění, zejména ze steampunkových strojů, prostupuje životy postav. Zatímco některé steampunkové romány zobrazují čisté a ekologicky šetrné technologie, většina z nich naznačuje, že stroje jsou destruktivní a špatné. Stroj *Zemětras* je příkladem této ničivé síly, která způsobí tragédii, při které uvolňují smrtící plyn zanechává Seattle ve stavu rozkladu a znečištění. Znečištění se šíří mimo ovzduší do životního prostředí, přičemž plyn vede ke vzniku zombie a nutí přeživší žít v podzemí. Životní prostředí Seattlu se stává pustým a bez života, což zdůrazňuje důsledky nekontrolovaného znečištění. Trosky a lidské pozůstatky se nacházejí po celém městě, ponechány nepohřbené kvůli nebezpečným podmínkám. Lidský odpad přispívá ke zhoršování stavu znečištění. Hlavním zdrojem znečištění ovzduší je jedovatý plyn, který se vynořuje ze země.



Romány také zkoumají možné zneužití plynu jako chemické a biologické zbraně. Tato pasáž zdůrazňuje neetickou a destruktivní povahu chemických a biologických zbraní a varuje před jejich použitím navzdory pokusům dosáhnout vítězství ve válce. Zdůrazňuje rizika spojená s použitím nemocí jako zbraně a nebezpečí nakažení při použití. Celkově tato kapitola vrhá světlo na environmentální a biologické důsledky zobrazené v románech a připomíná čtenářům potenciální důsledky znečištění, nedbalosti a zneužití technologie ve fiktivním světě *Mechanického století*.

Práce zkoumala zobrazení feminismu, třídní diskriminace a environmentálních a biologických dopadů v *Mechanickém století*. Ponořením se do těchto otázek, romány vyzývají čtenáře, aby přemýšleli o našem vlastním světě a výzvách, kterým čelíme, a zároveň nabízejí imaginativní a vzrušující cestu alternativní realitou v dobrodružném, steampunkovém prostředí.

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