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NARRATING A WAY OUT OF DYSTOPIA: VOICE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Tesis sometida a la consideración de la Comisión del Programa de Estudios de Posgrado en Literatura para optar al grado y título de Maestría Académica en Literatura Inglesa

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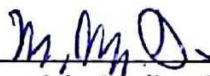

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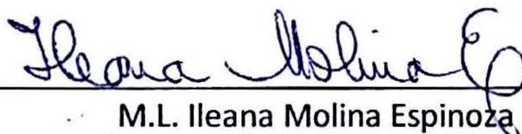

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Resumen

El presente estudio analiza la novela *El Cuento de la Criada* de Margaret Atwood desde una perspectiva feminista-distópica. El sistema patriarcal, totalitario, y teocrático representado en la novela objetiviza a las mujeres y las posiciona al final del modelo jerárquico. Una vez contextualizada la novela como un distopía femenina, analizo los mecanismos de poder y control en distopía y la forma en que están representados en la novela. También analizo como estos mecanismos de poder fomentan la desigualdad de género, reprimen la sexualidad femenina y oprimen la subjetividad femenina. Finalmente, desafío la identidad tergiversada de la protagonista por la crítica anterior y demuestro cómo a través de la narración de su historia, la protagonista ejerce su voz, desafía el discurso patriarcal en la República de Gilead y reconstruye su estatus de sujeto.

Abstract

The present study analyzes Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* from a feminist-dystopian perspective. The patriarchal, totalitarian, theocratic system depicted in the novel objectifies women and places them at the bottom of the hierarchical model. After contextualizing the novel as a female dystopia, I analyze the mechanisms of power and control found in dystopia and the way they are portrayed in the novel. I also analyze how these mechanisms of power foment gender inequality, repress female sexuality, and oppress female subjectivity. Finally, I challenge the protagonist's misinterpreted identity and show how through the narration of her story, she exercises her voice, challenges the patriarchal discourse in the Republic of Gilead, and reconstructs her status as subject.

INTRODUCTION

Narrating a Way out of Dystopia: Voice in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

As a feminist woman, I try to picture the future and the role that women will have in their societies as a positive one. The obstacles that women have faced over the centuries, and the ability and strength by which they have achieved their goals, is the main reason why I am who I am: an independent woman able to choose her own mind and body. I am able to write this work because of everything women have fought for before me. I want to think of a future in which women do not need to fight for equal rights anymore because those rights will be there, at hand, for them to enjoy. Unquestionably, what I hope for the future is utopian. As much as I would like to live to see it, the fact that patriarchal societies all over the world still oppress women fuels a constant struggle that is not yet won. In some countries, the conditions for women have improved a great deal; unfortunately, in others, women's only hope is to fantasize about it.

Let us imagine this: somewhere in time and space, a government decides that the only way to preserve humanity is by means of returning to "traditional values." Women's new role is exclusively that of bearing children, and men's main role is that of providing the means to achieve that goal. In a society that objectifies and classifies women according to this function, the lack of identity, autonomy and voice is disguised as necessary for "the common good." In this "new" society, a few men hold power, individuality does not exist, female voices are lost, and mechanisms of fear are used to control women while their

bodies are subjected to functionality. Science fiction, many will say, but, how far away are we from that reality?

In her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale,* Margaret Atwood portrays the ways in which the structures of power—redefined in terms of social, political, and economic superiority—place women at the bottom of the hierarchy. Oppressed by this society, women lose all means of freedom and with it their individuality, their voice, and the freedom to decide over their own bodies; in this new context, the government classifies women in terms of functionality. Offred—the main character in the book—a married woman and mother of one little girl, is forced to become a Handmaid. Her role now is to obey men's rules about her mind and body. Her purpose in life is to have a child, even though her own child was taken away from her in order to fulfill this purpose. Now, she is part of a group, the Handmaids, and her name, individuality, freedom, voice, and body are removed from her; the rights she once thought her own do not belong to her anymore.

Even though structures of power place women at the bottom of the hierarchical model, solely as tools for reproduction, Offred encounters a different reality. The power that she once thought lost finds its way back to her through the narration of *herstory*. Her identity is now defined not in terms of reproduction but in terms of her own acknowledgement of the power that lies within her mind and body. A fervent opponent to this society, she is caught inside a dystopian world that gives her little option other than survival. Although she is part of a group—the Handmaids—her isolation leads her to define her individuality, and by narrating *herstory* and being able to digress from it in order to escape her reality, she discovers her authentic voice and becomes a heroine. Anyone who

survives in a totalitarian system is by default a heroine: rejecting the system signifies death, but coping with it signifies life.

Justification

I decided to use Margaret Atwood for her unique, extraordinary ability to tell stories about women. I believe that Atwood's interest in telling women's stories demonstrates her commitment to help eradicate female stereotypes and misconceptions in society. Her female protagonists and their multiple roles embody the power and resilience of women, even more when it comes to survival in oppressive patriarchal societies. *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is perhaps Atwood's most well-known novel, has as its protagonist Offred, a woman who is forced to live under a patriarchal, theocratic system that classifies women according to their ability to bear children. Since its publication in 1985, the novel has been analyzed and criticized from different perspectives. Besides the most obvious points of criticism—violation of human rights, power structures, the novel's function as both a critique of a misogynist, totalitarian culture and a warning for the future—Offred has suffered the most in the hands of critics, for many believe her to be a victim, a damsel in distress, waiting to be rescued by a man. Critics have misjudged the fact that her passivity inside Gilead does not make her a victim, but rather a survivor. To date, most critics have proposed that Offred's apparent passivity represents a failure to resist the patriarchal, totalitarian regime; however, they have failed to see that resistance comes in different ways. Resistance through narration is Offred's main vehicle of escape and transformation. The general purpose of this work is to provide an innovative perspective on the role Offred

has in the novel. Critics have failed to see that Offred challenges her status as a sexual object, becoming a subject through the exercising of her voice. Offred makes a choice: she chooses to tell *herstory,* and by doing so she challenges the dominant, misogynist discourse of the Republic of Gilead. My intention is to liberate Offred from her imposed, misinterpreted identity and present her a subject whose voice has lived beyond the constraints of the Republic of Gilead.

Hypothesis

Even though Gilead's patriarchal structures of power place women at the bottom of the hierarchical model, making them objectified tools for reproduction*,* by means of storytelling, Offred exercises her voice, challenges patriarchal discourse, and reconstructs her status as subject in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale.*

General Objective

To analyze, from a feminist-dystopian perspective, how Offred is able to exercise her voice and defy patriarchal discourse through the narration of *herstory,* not only escaping from a misogynist, totalitarian system in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, but also becoming a subject in the process.

Specific Objectives

1. To define and present a historical account of science fiction, utopia, dystopia, female utopia, and female dystopia in order to contextualize the novel as a female dystopia.

2. To identify the mechanisms of power and control found in dystopia, including biopolitics, discipline, the panopticon, propaganda, religion, tradition, female sexuality, sexual violence, and female objectification.
3. To analyze how these mechanisms of power and control are represented and developed in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.
4. To analyze how these mechanisms of power foment gender inequality, repress female sexuality, and oppress female subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.
5. To challenge Offred's misinterpreted identity, showing how through the narration of *herstory* and the exercising of her voice, Offred reconstructs her status as subject in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.
6. To analyze how through the reconstruction of her status as subject, Offred challenges and triumphs over the dystopian, patriarchal society in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Setting the Context: Margaret Atwood[1]

Margaret Atwood, born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, is a well-known contemporary fiction and nonfiction writer who has published more than forty books, including novels, short fiction books, nonfiction works and numerous works on poetry, among others. Her books have won several prestigious prizes, including the Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin* in 2000, the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction for

[1] This biography is based on several articles and interviews about the writer's life and work (See respective bibliographical entries for Ingersoll, Howells, and Bloom).

The Handmaid's Tale in 1986, and the Prince of Asturias Award for Letters[2] in 2008. As a child, she was home-schooled by her mother, and her father, who was an entomologist, taught her through observation. Atwood started writing at the age of six, influenced mainly by Grimm's fairy tales and her environment. After a "dark period" between the ages of eight and sixteen (Ingersoll 70), she resumed her writing, which later led to her decision to become a full time writer. Becoming a female writer was a painful decision for Atwood because at the time male writers dominated the literary field, and there was no framework for analyzing the work of female writers. Needless to say, she overcame both obstacles.

In 1961, she received her Bachelor's degree at Victoria College, University of Toronto, the same year she self-published her first collection of poetry *Double Persephone*. In 1962, she obtained her Master's degree at Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and continued her studies at Harvard University. However, she never finished her Ph. D. dissertation because by then she was fully committed to her career as a writer. Atwood dedicated part of her life to the rediscovery and reevaluation of Canadian literature. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, published in 1972, is Atwood's major contribution to Canadian literary criticism, after realizing, back in 1961 in the United States, "how little the Americans knew about Canada" (Howells, *The Handmaid's Tale* 110). Atwood is currently living in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson; in 2011 she published *In*

[2] Atwood's was awarded because of her "outstanding literary work that has explored different genres with acuteness and irony, and because she cleverly assumes the classic tradition, defends women's dignity and denounces social unfairness" ("Prestigious Asturias").

Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination, a text that recounts her now intimate relationship with the science fiction genre.

Atwood has always been under the scrutiny of many literary critics. Her works have been the subject of many controversies and her characters have been often confused with the writer and, because of it, misunderstood. As a female writer, and in spite of her insistence on not being labeled a "feminist,"[3] Margaret Atwood's female protagonists are definitely dedicated to the cause of raising awareness about women's multiple—and sometimes misunderstood—roles in society. Atwood argues that female writers and female characters have been—and still are—stereotyped: women are expected to be flawless, she states, and those who are not, particularly powerful women, are considered supernatural, evil creatures (*La maldición de Eva* 37-38). Atwood creates female protagonists—with the exception of Snowman, the protagonist of *Oryx and Crake*—to tell women's stories.[4] Early in life, she became familiar with the discriminatory sexist practices in society towards women, an appalling experience for a person who grew up in an environment free of stereotypes, sexism and conservative rules. Her liberal upbringing marked her life as a woman and consequently as a writer.

Atwood's tendency towards feminism is clearly portrayed in her books. Her works depict the stories of multiple women in exquisite detail and with a remarkable but shocking

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[3] Regarding the label "feminist," Atwood has said that "[she] would not deny the adjective, but [she does not] consider it inclusive" (Ingersoll 139). In other words, Atwood believes that labeling is a powerful but risky tool that sometimes may lead to misinterpretation, hence her reluctance on being called *just* a "feminist."

[4] I will discuss the importance of female narration, from a feminist point of view, later in this work, to demonstrate how by telling *herstory*, Offred, the protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale*, exercises her voice.

similarity with reality. Atwood's daily and worldly experiences have served as a basis for her writing, and the creation of female protagonists mirrors the writer's society, whether partially or completely. Women's roles have been misrepresented many times, and it is through these female protagonists and the common features that they share that Atwood tells their "real" *herstories*. Her study of Canadian victimization[5] gives readers the necessary tools to study the development of her female protagonists. Her heroines first have to acknowledge their position as victims and then tell their stories in order to become "creative non-victims,"[6] survivors in male-dominated societies. By telling their stories, these "creative non-victims" reverse the so-called "fixed" power structures of a society, recovering their silenced voices. By "writing their bodies," Atwood's protagonists are able to recover their power and their voice. Storytelling is, in Atwood's novels, the ultimate means for female discourse to survive. As we will see, *The Handmaid's Tale* shares these themes, to a great extent. One thing is for sure about Margaret Atwood's works: her female characters, protagonists, and narrators are here to tell us stories about women and women's survival, reflecting the innumerable concerns of women in their daily lives. Although some may emphasize literature's capacity to fictionalize stories—calling them

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[5] According to Atwood, the "great Canadian victim complex" is the idea of defining oneself as innocent and therefore not taking responsibility for one's actions. This concept is also reflected in women when they are seen as helpless victims of the circumstances. Atwood affirms that it is not until one stops defining oneself as a victim and starts making choices and taking responsibility for one's actions that the role of victim will be discarded (Ingersoll 13).

[6] According to Atwood, a creative non-victim is someone who "moves out of victim patterns, transcends traditional roles, and learns to tell her own story" (qtd. in Beran 68).

fiction instead of fact to reduce their relevancy—Margaret Atwood's works, particularly *The Handmaid's Tale*, are vivid reflections of contemporary realities and societies.

CHAPTER I: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

> Como Orwell nos enseña, lo decisivo no son las etiquetas—cristianismo, socialismo, islam, democracia, dos patas vale, cuatro patas no vale, el esfuerzo—, sino lo que se haga en su nombre.
>
> Margaret Atwood, *La Maldición de Eva*

The Handmaid's Tale: Origins and Criticism

Margaret Atwood's motivation in writing *The Handmaid's Tale* is diverse and complex. Her concerns regarding the "human condition," as well as human rights and environmental issues, among others,[7] are key aspects in the creation of the novel. According to Coral Ann Howells, when Atwood started thinking about the novel, back in 1981, she collected several newspaper and magazine pieces which dealt with "historical and humanitarian interests," including,

> reports of atrocities in Latin America, Iran and the Philippines, together with cuttings on surrogate mothers, forms of institutional control of human reproduction from Nazi Germany to Ceausescu's Romania, plus a warning given by a Canadian feminist sociologist on threats to women from new reproductive technologies. (*The Handmaid's Tale* 7)

Although the book portrays a futuristic scenario with a terribly pessimistic portrait of its inhabitants, its birth is based on what was happening at the onset of the 1980s. Atwood

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[7] Coral Ann Howells argues, "Atwood's enduring concerns, which we see displayed in the dystopian fiction of *The Handmaid's Tale* [are] her feminism and her scrutiny of male-female relationships, her ecological interests, her nationalist concerns with relations between Canada and the United States, and her wider concerns with basic human rights under various forms of state oppression (*The Handmaid's Tale* 112)."

depicted her concern about the present, not so much about the future. Howells explains that the novel is a “mirror image of what is happening in the world around us” while portraying an atrocious but plausible “nightmare future” (7).

Atwood also became familiarized with American Puritanism and their longing for a “theocratic Utopia” (Stimpson 764), which helped her frame the novel. Harold Bloom believes that Atwood’s purpose in writing about Puritanism is basically to warn us about the Puritans’ “long and dangerous” history, which is reflected in “speculative fictions from Hawthorne[8] to Atwood [which] legitimately play upon its darkest aspects” (“Introduction” 2). Gilead, Barbara Hill Rigney observes, “is a ghost of Puritan America, in which witches still hang, sex for pleasure is forbidden, and language is subject to censorship” (61). *The Handmaid’s Tale* portrays the horrific treatment that women have endured since Puritan times, the present—whether the 1980s when Atwood wrote the novel or our present—and most likely the future: “Social evil as depicted in Atwood’s novels frequently assumes up-to-date forms, however. [The] *Handmaid’s Tale,* for example, anticipates the revelations about the mistreatment of women under present-day theocratic regimes . . .” (White 168).

Influenced also by science fiction, particularly George Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm*, Atwood would find another source of inspiration. According to critics and to Atwood herself, the section entitled “Historical Notes” at the end of *The Handmaid’s Tale* resembles

[8] Alice M. Palumbo compares, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne’s red “A” (as an adulteress) to Offred’s red dress (as a handmaid). Offred, she states, “strives in her narrative for the multiplicity that Gilead denies her in body” (29).

Orwells' "The Principles of Newspeak" in *1984*.[9] Atwood uses this section as basis for her own "Historical Notes" in order to tell her readers that Gilead and the theocratic system are "a thing of the past." Based on "present" concerns (1980s at the time) and the past history of Puritan America, Atwood creates the fictional, futuristic city of Gilead in the United States. Atwood's sources of inspiration come from very different places; her concern with the environment, the human condition, the misogynist treatment that women have suffered and continue to suffer around the world, and the influence that American Puritanism and science fiction had on her are the key elements that shape her most well-known novel.

General Criticism

Criticism regarding Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is extensive. Since its publication in 1985, the novel has been scrutinized down to its most insignificant detail, and it has been the subject of numerous controversies, most of them, unsurprisingly, at the hands of feminist critics. The novel contains various elements that belong to different genres or traditions[10]; however, it is the novel's designation as a dystopia that this work

[9] Atwood argues that Orwell too has been misunderstood quite often: "Orwell is much more optimistic than people give him credit for. . . . He has a text at the end of 1984. Most people think the book ends when Winston comes to love Big Brother. But it doesn't. It ends with a note on Newspeak, which is written in the past tense, in standard English—which means that, at the time of writing the note, Newspeak is a thing of the past" (Ingersoll 217).

[10] J. Brooks Bouson, for instance, comments: "A feminist dystopia, but also part lurid Gothic fantasy and domestic romance plot, *The Handmaid's Tale* lays bare the inherent misogyny of patriarchal culture" (43).

will focus on.[11] A female protagonist—a female voice—makes *The Handmaid's Tale* unlike other classical dystopias, which allows Atwood's "invasion" into the science fiction field (or speculative fiction).

Some critics, such as Nathalie Cooke and Amin Malak, prefer to concentrate, however, on its satirical and ironical content. The exaggerated form of society's most bizarre mind-set, which is introduced by means of the novel's epigraphs, and its turn toward gothic romance, emphasize, for some critics, the fact that Offred does not change her role in society—her life before Gilead and afterwards—but simply her physical space. Catharine R. Stimpson comments that the function of satire in the novel is political: "to weaken the grip of the cruel and foolish by sending them up witless" (765). While the political function of the novel is, to some extent, evident, Offred's characterization has usually been misinterpreted. Her allegedly unchanging role during and after Gilead is actually not static: she changes *herstory* through the narration of it.

Reality vs. Fiction

In addition, critics of the novel have also studied the possibility of it becoming a true "story." While some readings of the novel perceive it as an "imaginatively plausible" society in spite of its fictional features (Stimpson 767), others, such as Gorman Beauchamp's reading, consider the future depicted in Gilead an impossibility. In his analysis, Beauchamp argues that the novel intends to frighten its readers of "too much about too little" (16). He

[11] I will develop definitions of dystopia and the like, as well as its relevancy to the novel, later in this work.

suggests that American fundamentalism is highly exaggerated in the novel and that the Handmaid's surrogacy is "not at all an instance of patriarchal dominance or exploitation" (19) since, for him, Atwood fails to interpret properly the Biblical episode[12] which is the basis of Gilead. Beauchamp believes the destruction of the American democracy implausible and considers the novel a possible story only for those who want to be afraid. For Beauchamp, Gilead is nothing but a fictional setting created to exaggerate the consequences of a non-existent fundamentalist state. However, as stated before, Atwood's collection of newspaper and magazine articles recount the threats to women which actually happened or were happening at the time she started writing the novel and demonstrate that even though the novel remains a work of fiction, her similarity with reality is strikingly shocking.

The Function of the Novel

The Handmaid's Tale's apparent function is that of a warning. Critics believe it warns us about society's damaged present—whether 1980s or our current present—and a warning about the future, about what might happen if people do not change their present attitudes and/or actions. According to critic Madonne Miner, speculative fiction combines past and present as a critique of our world. Because it remarks upon present attitudes, its

[12] "And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And she gave him Bilhah her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her. And Bilhah conceived, and bare Jacob a son" (*King James Bible*, Gen. 30.1-5).

function is double: What might happen in the future? And what is happening now? According to Bouson, Offred's narration about the past[13] also reveals a strong critique of a culture of misogyny, sexual degradation and violence towards women (45). Similarly, Miner discusses that *The Handmaid's Tale* merges past, present and future. For many critics, such as J. Brooks Bouson, what Atwood portrays in her novel about her "present" society—that of the 1980s—is the conflict between the Feminist Movement and the New Right Movement in the United States. On the one hand, quoting Susan Faludi, Bouson comments on the attacks made on feminism: the New Right movement claimed that feminists were against husbands' "God-given responsibility" (41) to rule their wives and homes, and they wanted to return women to traditional roles and to their homes as their ultimate goal. Beauchamp offers a definition of feminism in the eyes of Pat Robertson[14]: "a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians" (15). *The Handmaid's Tale*, observes Bouson, mirrors what the New Right movement was looking for: "the virtual enslavement of women, their reduction to mere functions, to mute, replaceable objects" (42). The latter characteristics are clearly portrayed in the novel, mainly through the way the regime treats female characters, as a form of criticizing past and current societies and a warning about future ones.

[13] What she refers to as "the time before" in the novel.

[14] "M. G. 'Pat' Robertson has achieved national and international recognition as a religious broadcaster, philanthropist, educator, religious leader, businessman and author. He is the founder and chairman of The Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) Inc. and founder of International Family Entertainment Inc., Regent University, Operation Blessing International Relief and Development Corporation, American Center for Law and Justice, The Flying Hospital, Inc., and several other organizations and broadcast entities" ("Biography").

On the other hand, the feminist movement in the United States strongly condemned the Right-Wing movement, which is reflected in the novel as well. Roberta Rubenstein and J. Brooks Bouson, for instance, consider female anxieties regarding reproduction—fertility, procreation and maternity—to be not only a “feminist nightmare and cultural catastrophe,” but also highly “idealized” and “dehumanized” concepts in the novel (Rubenstein 12). Bouson builds on this idea by adding that Offred’s “fervent—and orthodox—desire for pregnancy” demands also “a loss of control” and “a threat to the self” (48). The system, according to Rubenstein and Malak, forces Offred to have sex in order to survive—by functioning as a procreator of life—and to use her body against herself. In the Gilead system, Bouson states, women lose their individual identities and are transformed into passive, submissive, and disposable objects. According to Roberta Rubenstein and Sharon Rose Wilson, the system uses the female body, as a whole, as an instrument of domination, but it uses body parts in general to disembody and dismember the female body. The female body in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the essential means for oppression. At its macro level, Madeleine Davies notes, Atwood manifests ideas of incarceration and surveillance in regards to the female body in her text. Because the regime considers female bodies a risk to the regime, they are constantly watched by the patriarchy. Female bodies, Davies states, are physically and metaphorically contained by a social order that aims to silence them. Offred, according to Bouson, is treated as a body without a mind, a woman defined only by “her reproductive role” (48). In the novel, Atwood juxtaposes the New Right movement and the feminist movement, and she criticizes and warns us about the consequences of extremist ideologies like the New Right.

Totalitarian Regime: Power Distribution

The majority of critics concur on the novel's negative portrayal of a totalitarian system for its citizens in general; however, women—particularly the Handmaids—are the most affected by the implementation of this new regime. Malak highlights how men as a gender cannot be completely pointed at as the only perpetrators since male characters in the novel seem to be overall fragile as well. The victimization process and denial of choices, Malak argues, are extended to everyone in Gilead, not just the Handmaids. Critics such as Howells and Cooke discuss the fact that *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on cruelty in terms of violation of human rights, portrayed mainly in the forms of forced sex and reproductive function, and the unequal distribution of power among individuals—both by exposing society's failures and by presenting how a fundamentalist regime oppresses women. Regarding this oppression, Miner maintains that in a sexist society, "women and flesh are interchangeable" (26), an aspect that Offred does not want to recognize. On the surface, it may be argued that the regime affects both men and women equally; nevertheless, the novel unmistakably emphasizes women's complete loss of identity and choice in a system dominated by men.

Female Objectification and Power Distribution

For some critics, such as Bouson, the "impregnation ritual," along with its pornographic, voyeuristic and disturbing characteristics, is simply a way to cover and justify the rape act: after all, men in this regime are in control of female sexuality. For Catharine MacKinnon, "sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjection of women"

(qtd. in Bouson 51). Other critics, such as Pilar Somacarrera and Barbara Hill Rigney, comment on how the regime imposes power through "brainwashing" and "strict surveillance," and even though men supervise both, women are in charge of implementing these mechanisms, stressing the fact that some women in the novel commit terrible crimes toward other women. As a result, power circulates among women as well: matriarchal power—exerted by the Aunts—and sexual power—the one Offred has over Serena Joy are some examples Somacarrera and Bouson give. In spite of this, the distribution of power among individuals is not equal; in fact, according to Cooke, Malak and Bouson, the novel exaggerates and exposes gender inequality: men exercise domination and sexual supremacy over women, both inside and outside the system.

Offred: Victim or Rebel?

Cooke argues that for most of the first part of the novel, Offred's constant desire to be in control contradicts her lack of action; the majority of critics believe that Offred lacks control over her life and story and is incapable of any action, thus embodying a victim and never a rebel. In this sense, Cooke and Bouson see Offred not as the victim of cruel circumstances but as someone who refuses to act independently, taking risks only when men help her. Cooke contrasts Offred's passivity with other women around her—Offred's mother, Moira, and Ofglen—and compares her to those who comply or blindly accept the system—the Aunts, Serena Joy and Janine. Offred's only source of escape is in the images of other people and in the stealing of "insignificant" objects. Moira's escape attempts, for instance, offer her—and the other Handmaids—a sense of freedom and pleasure while the

thought of stealing an object to call her own offers her a sense of control. On the contrary, Malak believes that Offred actually becomes aware of her position as a victim and of the fact that her role is not static. She starts taking risky but confident steps which help her not only hope for a better future, but to gradually transform herself into a true survivor of the system. Some critics fail to acknowledge Offred's rebel spirit; her stealing of "insignificant" objects is in itself a rebellious act. We have to keep in mind that under a totalitarian system, people live in a constant state of fear, and even the smallest act of treason (as the desire to steal a dried daffodil) may result in a death sentence. Offred is not a victim but a survivor of a strict, sexist regime.

Resistance in Dystopia

The Handmaid's Tale portrays several instances of resistance; however, critics tend to focus on resistance against the regime itself and female resistance. Most of the critics agree—White and Malak included—that power inevitably results in abusive behaviors, which is worth fighting against. Other critics, such as Alice M. Palumbo, support this view by seeing resistance to power as a necessity for individuals to resist the system. Resistance is a direct response towards Gilead's theocratic discourse, which objectifies women in accordance to their function for the benefit of "all." Staels criticizes the artificial and manipulative discourse based on the Bible, which through the "Word of God" abuses the power of language to control the population.

Other critics, such as Somacarrera and Cooke, however, believe that resistance comes not exclusively from the subjects of the society but from within the system itself.

Somacarrera and Cooke believe that in *The Handmaid's Tale* the existence of clubs, such as Jezebel's, and external resistance groups, such as Mayday and the Underground Female Road, ironically devalue Gilead's rules: both are born because of failures in the system. Regarding the latter, Hilde Staels argues that the "underground," historically speaking, is the place where "subversives attempt to disrupt the power of the regime above ground" (114).

Female Resistance Through Narration: Success or Failure?

In the novel, women have lost their voices and become objects. Offred loses her subjectivity when she loses her right to speak and write—the loss of language, in the words of Stein. Nevertheless, according to Jones, Staels, and Hogsette, Offred is able to exercise her voice and to resist objectification after escaping through the Underground Female Road and telling her story. Female resistance, in the form of narration, allows Offred to rediscover her selfhood, to grow more "politically aware and self-conscious" (Stein 270). Although her "voice ends in indeterminacy" (Jones 10), and there is no "cathartic victory," the text itself offers "the promise of resistance" (Murphy 33), for Offred becomes voiced and visible to the reader "through the appropriation of language" (Stein 272).

Davies also sees female narration as the means to escape from the constant confinement and surveillance that is both self-imposed and conducted by other women. Similarly, Howells comments that Offred's story and voice through the transcriptions represent "the survival of the human spirit" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 6). Like Davies and Howells, Palumbo and Stein also believe that Offred's telling of her story is the only way of

surviving in the oppressive system. Stein affirms that although “to tell her tale is to risk her life,” Offred tells “her story to save her life” (269). What makes Offred’s voice even more powerful is the fact that women’s voices in dystopias, Jones asserts, “are doubly powerful, as they rebound from negative silencing into clamorous sound” (11). According to Howells and Staels, Offred’s narration challenges “the absolute authority of Gilead” (Howells, *The Handmaid’s Tale 73*) and “the meaning system established by the rulers of the theocracy” (Staels 233).

In contrast, various critics, such as Ketterer, Cooke, Staels, and Stein, comment on the weaknesses/flaws of argumentation in Offred’s narrative. The first of these flaws is based on Offred’s tale as a reconstruction. According to David Ketterer, since Offred’s tale is a reconstruction, it may not be the entire truth (215). Similarly, Staels comments that “[t]he tale can never be an authentic account of lived experience or a mimetic representation of reality [for] the act of telling covers up the horror of reality” (123). Offred as a narrator is discredited and seen as unreliable narrator. The gaps found in the story, the different endings she provides for different people—Moira and Luke for instance—, the shifts from present to past, and the fact that she tells the story once she is outside Gilead are examples that some critics give to support her unreliability as a narrator. Moreover, since the novel offers no closure, solely an ending, Stein believes that Offred’s story remains “deferred, untold” (273). As a narrator, nevertheless, Offred is “sympathetic,” her tale is political and has a moral, and she tells *herstory* in “poetic and personal detail” (Stillman and Johnson 71). All of these characteristics respond to the genre Offred uses to tell her story: oral narration. David Ketterer asserts that “what might be criticized as

overwordiness . . . could be justified as perfectly suited to the mode of oral narration. The style suits the teller" (215). In addition, Staels believes that Pieixoto fails to recognize the importance of maintaining gaps and unrecorded experience in Offred's tale, echoing "the authoritative word of Gilead" (125).

The second most debatable issue regarding Offred's narration is the novel's epilogue: the "Historical Notes." Various critics, such as Stein, Murphy, Staels, and Cooke, have concluded that the "Historical Notes" narrative discredits Offred's narration because her voice has been replaced by a male, sexist voice: "his [Pieixoto's] voice is the last word of the story. Offred's tale has become his possession" (276). Moreover, Murphy and Staels affirm that Offred's voice is muted once again; Murphy states that Pieixoto attempts to analyze "history on the basis of male biography, and thereby *mutes* the woman's voice" (35). Offred's narrative is seen as a deceit because in the end we realize that the reconstruction is not hers, but belongs to those who found the cassettes: Professor Pieixoto and Wade: "In the war of words," Cooke comments, "Offred has lost" (131). Similar to the situation inside Gilead, Pieixoto uses Offred's tale to satisfy his own purpose, his own desire (Stein 274). According to Staels, "Darkness survives as well in the refusal of male intellectuals, of those who establish a literary canon, to acknowledge the value of a woman's perspective on patriarchal history" (126).

However, according to Jones, the "Historical Notes" is Atwood´s "indictment of the academy as an instrument of the silencing and victimization of women," (10) and a "parody of academic communication" (Banerjee). According to Jones, "the handmaid's voice breaks silence, for she is heard," and the fact that Offred remains a "rounded, real, and an

unforgettable character," as opposed to Professor Pieixoto whose only function is of a "didactic device," Offred's voice endures (11).

According to Stillman and Johnson, "Offred has no modes of resistance against Gilead, at least none that threaten Gilead in any way." They argue that even though Offred has her memories as a form to resist Gilead's authorized history, "a wry sense of humor," words that she uses cleverly, and transgressions of some rules, all of these instances lead to no real action and all of them represent the protagonist's failure to resist Gilead (75). Her most important transgression, the telling of her story, remains controversial, for some critics, such as Stein, believe that the transgression is useless due to its ambiguous ending, the limited amount of knowledge she manages, and the reconstruction of her experiences. The problem with this, in the words of Letcher, is that "[i]f we never learn the end of her story, all endings are possible" (qtd. in Stein 275). At the end, Stillman and Johnson state, Offred does not fight against dehumanization, but "falls back on her romanticism" (78).

Offred's narration is not a deceit; in fact, Offred liberates herself from the domination and control of Gilead through the narration of *herstory.* The main purpose of the last section of the novel, as we will see in the following paragraphs, is simply to acknowledge the destruction of the totalitarian system. Even though men are retelling Offred's story, one aspect is undeniable: the Republic of Gilead no longer exists, but Offred's narration has survived.

Female Resistance Through Love

Another form of female resistance, some critics argue, is the love plot depicted in the novel. While some critics concentrate on how love functions as a device of subversion, others reject the concept of love as a defiant force. Coral Ann Howells, Barbara Ehrenreich and Victoria Glendinning refer to Offred's survival, subversion against the patriarchal system, and escape as the result of the love story in the novel. However, Miner suggests that the love plot in the novel is actually ambivalent because it follows conservative forms (23). Miner proposes that Offred's relationships with Luke, the Commander (Fred) and Nick are surprisingly similar. Luke and the Commander, for example, have power over Offred by means of language, knowledge and their affinity to the past, which includes "old things and the ways of the past" (28). In both relationships, Offred is placed on a lower level. Her falling in love with Nick, Miner continues, is not that different from her relationship with these other men; he was the only available option to her: she was looking for a savior. While being in love—first with Luke, later with Nick—she loses herself and becomes passive; her love commitment is bigger than her own commitment to herself; she becomes a "fallen woman" (Miner 38) and "loses her desire to escape Gilead" (Bouson 57).

Similarly to Miner, Sandra Tomc argues that Offred falls in love with Nick because of his stereotypical characteristics of "hero" and "his ability to melt the heroine with his ways in bed" (86). Offred is rewarded, Tomc continues, for trusting Nick, ("the knight who rescues her from the menace") based on her feminine instincts. Offred's portrayal at the end of the novel, her inaction and trusting ability, leads to what Tomc sees as her only form of resistance: the one that exists solely in the protagonist's head. To introduce the subject,

Tomc analyzes what other critics have pointed out as the main problem: the contradiction between Offred's inaction and the novel's clear violation of feminist ideas. For Tomc, the problem consists of what she calls "Atwood's nationalist political paradigm," which causes her to create a heroine "whose sole resistance goes on inside her head" (85). Tomc believes that the novel, far from being part of an "insurgent feminism" (82), portrays "traditional stereotypes of feminine behaviour" (85). Tomc concludes that it is not a surprise that many critics consider Atwood's confidence in the love plot as Offred's real escape, "an abysmal political lapse" (87). Offred's love plot goes beyond a simple love story: she escapes the system not because she falls in love with Nick but because she recovers her body and embraces her sexuality. The game of seduction Offred plays in her head represents her desire for human contact—in itself an act of rebellion in this dystopian state. In a system that has deprived women of any possible human contact, Offred, uncertain of her future, is risking her own life. By doing so, she resists the system once more and accomplishes her goal: escaping. Whether it comes from within the system or outside of it, resistance is without a doubt one of the key issues developed in the novel because it stands for both the regime's flaws and hope for those trapped in it.

History vs. Story

The last section of the novel, the "Historical Notes," has received varied critiques over the years. While for some critics it synthesizes the concept of history's objectivity, others affirm that the section's ironic tone allows readers to fully understand the irony of Offred's tale. "Any historical account," as Linda Hutcheon notes, "is only a reconstruction

from fragments of the past" and hence highly subjective (qtd. in Vevaina 86). The "Historical Notes" section at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* is clear example of this. While Martine Watson notes how this section stresses the difficulties of "writing and interpreting history" (5), Coomi S. Vevaina addresses the difference between "official historical records" (macro-history) and narratives told by "marginalized voices or eyewitness accounts" (micro-history) (86). As I will discuss later in this work, who has the authority to speak and who defines that authority becomes relevant in a society where marginalized groups are silenced and dominant groups voiced.

Many critics, Atwood included, have drawn comparisons between *The Handmaid's Tale's* "Historical Notes" and *1984's* "The Principles of Newspeak." In both sections, critics argue, the reader realizes that the totalitarian regime that the novels portray did not survive, but at the same time, it reveals other aspects of the existing society in the novel. According to Watson, the "Historical Notes" section differs from "The Principles of Newspeak" due to Professor Pieixoto's lack of critical thinking when interpreting the Handmaid's narrative, perpetuating the idea of androcentrism and misogyny. Critic Malak arrives at a similar conclusion saying that whenever a critic (he refers to Professor Pieixoto) and/or a reader perpetuates sexist tendencies by "supposedly" abstaining from taking any moral or political position about the issue under discussion, she/he becomes a defender of the system. Another difficulty regarding the "Historical Notes," Rigney notes, is the fact that "dates are not always so dependable" (61) because the representation of the past and of the future seems to be equally deceptive. Therefore, to trust history and the historian is an impossible task, says Rigney.

Objective vs. Subjective Accounts

Offred's narrative lives between the concepts of history and story; as Bouson notes, even though history is open to interpretation, it still possesses the quality of a "lived experience" (61). Thus, Offred's account cannot simply be called a story because "history is more than a story" (62). Wilson also believes that the "Historical Notes" section parodies "scholars and scholarly conferences and the novel's own double endings" by "objectively" evaluating "horrors of history" and by presenting a speaker that treats women as the Gilead system did (77). However, Wilson notes, to acknowledge that the voice of the repressed has survived the regime is the most important aspect about the interpretation of this section. As discussed by Glenn Deer, critics Amin Malak, Arnold Davidson, Harriet Bergmann, and W. F. Garrett-Petts observe and analyze the ironic content of the "Historical Notes." For them, the irony consists of how male scholars in the future fail to interpret Offred's narrative. Showing no "compassion or emotional sympathy" (94), they say, helps to support and maintain the sexist principles of Gilead, reducing the novel's protagonist to a simple but almost invisible narrator. Likewise, Staels comments on how the misreading of Offred's story marginalizes her personal "mind-set" (126).

In Offred's defense, Deer argues, many critics have failed to see Offred's narrative style as powerful. Deer considers her a connoisseur of language and the paradoxes of power. As a storyteller, she is someone who is able to emotionally detach herself from her story, but at the same time, her narrative is sometimes shadowed by her characterization as a Handmaid. Staels also exalts Offred's narrative: her "alternative discourse" constantly counters the structure of the "main" discourse. The utterance of "inner feelings" and

"bodily sensations" recondition the possibilities of meaning, rejecting the almost unsound use of language she was forced to use in Gilead (118). Definitely, the fact that a man is in charge of retelling Offred's story is a strong point of critique Atwood achieves in her novel. Professor Pieixoto is not able to recognize the real value of Offred's story, diminishing it by calling his lecture "Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid's Tale." The emphasis of his discussion is to legitimize the cassettes and to find out more about the society *per se*, leaving Offred's story of survival and resistance aside.

Summary and Conclusions

As stated before, *The Handmaid's Tale* has generated much criticism. Reviews of the novel and criticism about it are diverse. While some critics try to define what genre the novel belongs to, others argue about its main function and the likelihood of its being a true story or merely a work of fiction. Nevertheless, they all tend to agree on one point: the novel is definitely a political story. Atwood has always been concerned with the "human condition," and her major source of inspiration is clearly the "present." By presenting a warning—whether about the past, present or future—the novel's main function is to criticize our societies. It portrays the conflict between the New Right Movement and the Feminist Movement in the United States in the 1980s, and its focus is obvious: women are objectified and reduced to submissive roles without any possibility of freedom of choice. The portrayal of the totalitarian system, even though it seems to affect everyone who is under its observation, depicts a significantly negative role for women. As mentioned before, this regime requires women to fulfill specific functions, such as reproduction, and

it forces the Handmaids, the most affected group of women in the novel, to bear children or die. The Handmaids who are not able to bear children will be named "Unwomen" and sent to the Colonies to perish under horrible, extremely dangerous conditions.

Numerous critics agree that *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts, in its most fundamental sense, the dangers of power and its association with individuals in a society. In the novel, the binary opposition powerful/powerless is not always static. Power, some critics argue, circulates among its members: men and women equally. Nonetheless, the existence of "matriarchal power," the one that the Aunts exert over the Handmaids, is just another way to mask reality since these critics fail to recognize that the Aunts are simply tools of the system, and as such victims of the circumstances. The options that women have in this theocratic regime are limited. Power structures and relations are in favor of men, who exert their power by means of sexual supremacy. As in any fascist system, the voices of those who are oppressed start to emerge through mechanisms of resistance. In the novel, critics identify female resistance in the form of narration, romance, and a mental escape.

Finally, one of the themes that critics discuss in abundance is the final section of the novel, the "Historical Notes." By debating its objectivity or lack of it, many critics believe its function in the novel is vital to the understanding of the story. Its ironic tone and the presentation of its misogynist speakers remind the reader of the warning that the novel tries to transmit: once again, the society's attitudes—200 years later—are sexist. It seems that the final section—like the rest of the novel—functions as a critique. As a final point, critics have long debated the active/passive role of Offred in the novel. Many critics believe Offred to be an inert character, due to her inability to act.

As a female dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a world in which women are placed at the bottom of the hierarchical model. In this totalitarian state, women, who are powerless, are forced to adopt a new role in accordance to what function they can perform, or else die, by becoming "Unwomen." The objectification of women for the benefit of men and society in general implicitly highlights the need for women to recover their voice and freedom over their bodies. The function of the novel is then extremely political: it criticizes society and warns us about a culture that degrades and oppresses women. While some critics argue the novel's possibility of becoming a true story, other critics emphasize the novel's "fictional" contents. The latter group believes that the novel is for those who want to be afraid and that surrogacy is "not at all an instance of patriarchal dominance or exploitation."

The twentieth-first century has witnessed terrible crimes against women—psychological, physical, sexual, including corrective rapes, female genital mutilation, female sexual trafficking, and violation of reproductive rights, among others. Domination over women's bodies and female sexuality is one of the most repudiated crimes we still face, and one that feminists and human rights defenders around the world are desperately trying to stop. Most critics see Offred, who is raped every month in order to get pregnant, as a character who lacks control over her life and refuses to act. Nevertheless, even though limited by the society she belongs to, Offred's power and resistance lie in her ability to exercise her voice and define her own identity by telling her story. In Atwood's terms, Offred becomes aware of her position as victim, which gives her confidence to defy the system gradually.

The novel portrays repeated patterns of mistreatment that women have suffered from at the hands of theocratic and misogynist systems. Some critics have diminished the novel, the protagonist, and the female voice that rises from it, believing that the novel lacks objectivity and plot action. Offred, many critics argue, never changes her role in society, but simply her physical space. However, as we will analyze in the present study, through the narration of *herstory*, Offred is able to liberate herself from the violence of this misogynist regime. Offred is not a passive character; her "lack of action" is the direct result of fear: the constant menace of being sent to the Colonies. It is imperative to remember that in a totalitarian state everything one does poses a threat, and Offred is clever enough to know when and how to act.

The female body, which is used as a reproduction vessel through rape, constitutes the essential means for oppression, for men control female sexuality. Nevertheless, for Offred the female body represents her means to freedom; her body has its own voice, and it is ready to tell *herstory*. Survival is for Offred her means of coping and enduring in a sexist environment. Through female resistance, the voice of the oppressed survives the regime. Unquestionably, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not a failed attempt to portray a "reality"; its similarity with many women's realities and the sexist practices that women have experienced and continue to experience nowadays is outrageously evident and vividly described in Atwood's narrative. The novel is a successful way to present female realities embodied in one tale.

CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Setting the Context. Science Fiction: An Introduction

> Is science fiction literature?
> Yes.
> Can it be judged by the usual literary criteria?
> No.
>
> Science fiction is, of course, about human concerns. It is written and read by human beings. But the culture from which it comes—the experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and learning that one must bring to it—these are not at all what we are used to as proper literature.
>
> Joanna Russ, "Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction"

Many critics believe that the beginnings of science fiction (sf)[15] can be found in Thomas More's worldwide famous novel *Utopia* (1516); others consider Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) the pioneer text of the genre, while still others think that Jules Verne's works (around 1860s and 1870s) were the first science fiction novels ever written. Although More's, Shelley's, and Verne's works do not seem to have much in common in terms of plot, characterization, or setting—an ideal society, the creation of a monster, or fantastic voyages—, they share one aspect that makes them precursors of what we understand as science fiction today: the ability to foresee different futures, futures that may not be real but are feasible. If we dare to compare science fiction with other genres—if we even dare to call it a genre—, the history of science fiction is surprisingly short. Back in 1971, James

[15] From now on the abbreviation sf will refer to science fiction, as commonly used in the field of literary criticism.

Gunn comments, there was no room for sf in the literary canon, so it desperately required "all the tools of scholarships, the reference works, the indexes, the histories, the encyclopedias, the studies and the canon" (xvi). In an article written in the mid-'70s, Joanna Russ[16] discusses the problematic of sf and criticism. According to Russ, there were some misconceptions regarding the new genre, for instance, the belief that science—as it was portrayed in the text—was solely the author's invention. Russ comments, "Science fiction must not offend against what is known. Only in areas where nothing is known—or knowledge is uncertain—is it permissible to just 'make it up'" (6). Another problem, Russ highlights, is when critics use their "knowledge of the recurrent and important themes of Western culture" (7) to interpret a science fiction text. She emphasizes the lack of an existing framework[17] to analyze a work of sf as the direct cause that makes it a highly criticized and misunderstood genre. Even though science fiction is now part of the literary canon and taught in universities around the world, it still remains one of the most controversial literary genres, and one of the most difficult to define. Therefore, in order to understand what science fiction is and its relevancy for the analysis to be done in this work, it is imperative to clarify some of the key concepts of this genre, as well as to contextualize its origins and development through the years.

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[16] Joanna Russ is a feminist, critic, and one of the most well-known sf writers of our time. Her most famous novel is *The Female Man* (1975), which portrays the lives of four different female protagonists who belong to four different realities. After the protagonists meet each other and share their own experiences, they start to analyze their own lives and to define what it means to be a woman.

[17] Russ argues, "Criticism of science fiction cannot possibly look like the criticism we are used to" (12). As with any other genre, science fiction needs to have a framework of its own.

Joanna Russ argues that science fiction's protagonists "are always collective, never individual persons (although individuals often appear as exemplary or representative figures)," its emphasis is always on "phenomena," its purpose is "didactic," and its tone is often "awed, worshipful, and religious" (what Damon Knight calls "sense of wonder") (5). This general description is what condenses the motifs of early science fiction—and much of the work that exists now, as we will discuss later. One of the aspects that makes sf controversial, according to Farah Mendlesohn, is its lack of predictable patterns—expected by the mainstream—which makes critics wonder whether sf possesses a narrative of its own (3). Although Mendlesohn considers sf not a genre but an "ongoing discussion" (1), there are certain concepts that may provide a clearer view of what science fiction is. "Sense of wonder," a term used in early sf theory, describes "a genuinely possible place . . . that is highly likely according to what we know of the universe" (Russ 9). Also, "sense of wonder" refers to the "appreciation of the sublime" whether the world described is "natural" or "technological" (Nye qtd. in Mendlesohn 3).[18] This basic narrative, Mendlesohn continues, was later combined with presentism[19] in an attempt to avoid the consequences of a possible future.

[18] In this respect, Russ compares sf to medieval painting because of its quality to address the mind instead of the eye. She comments, "[T]he science fiction writer can portray Jupiter as easily as the medieval painter can portray Heaven; neither of them has been there, but that doesn't matter. . . . Science fiction, like much medieval art, can deal with transcendental events. Hence the tendency of science fiction towards wonder, awe, and a religious or quasi-religious attitude towards the universe" (9).

[19] The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines presentism as "an attitude toward the past dominated by present-day attitudes and experiences" ("Presentism").

However, there was a shift at the end of the 1930s, and science fiction started to portray those future consequences (3-4). Another concept, the "thought experiment,"[20] which refers to the "what if?" of a text, is "crucial to all sf and has led to the most popular alternative interpretation of 'sf': speculative fiction. It is here that sf most departs from contemporary literature, because in sf 'the idea' is the hero" (4). Finally, once the "thought experiment" merges with the multiple "what ifs" of a text, readers experienced "cognitive estrangement"[21] which is "the sense that something in the fictive world is dissonant with the reader's experienced world" (5). These concepts constituted the basic structure of early sf stories, where readers fulfilled an important role in the interpretative process.

Critic Gwyneth Jones analyzes several "icons"[22] that belong to the science fiction genre and that are relevant to the analysis at hand. Among them, she mentions the creation of a world different from ours, which may be another planet or universe, or "a 'future world' in which conditions have changed in some dramatic way" (163). The active process of translation mentioned before consists of the reader's understanding of specific signs or icons, which identify the genre, warn the reader, and highlight changes in the new world described by the author (163). Another characteristic of science fiction, Mendlesohn adds, is the fact that descriptions "stand in for characterization," so the world and other elements

[20] Russ states that it is impossible to determine who coined the term "thought experiment" due to its wide use (14).

[21] Darko Suvin's definition.

[22] Gwyneth Jones defines icons as "the signs which announce the genre, which warn the reader that this is a different world; and at the same time constitute that difference" (163).

that are part of the landscape are regarded as characters (8). Similarly, Jones argues that the "the imaginary setting" is one of the major characters in sf, along with descriptions of "unreal objects, customs, kinships, fashions, that can be identified and decoded by the reader" (163). Although characterization (male and female characters) was not—at the onset of the genre—considered a very strong feature of sf because of its emphasis on "the imagined world" and "the action-adventure," Jones argues that "there are some remarkable exceptions to this rule . . ." (171). Sf's icons, Jones continues, "would be incomplete without some reference to that fabled sf cliché, the diaphanously clad damsel on the cover" who ends up being the reward for the hero (172). Modern sf introduced the "female-hero icons," which have not been negatively portrayed as men's rivals but as "permissive alter-egos" (Carol J. Clover qtd. in Jones 172). Most of these concepts and icons have had a significant transformation over the years; science fiction history—from the moment it was identified as a genre—has evolved into a more sophisticated, consolidated genre.

The history of science fiction is usually divided into four different periods. The first period involves early works of sf that existed prior to the genre. During the seventeenth century, according to Brian Stableford, speculative fiction was the first genre that introduced a specific framework in which writers developed their works based on the latest discoveries, technology and scientific methods (15). The imaginary voyage—utopian fantasy—was one of the first narratives written under the category of speculative fiction; however, social, religious, and political issues continued to be the major concerns of these works, which were usually based on dreams, the only reliable source to explain the future

at the time (15-16). By the eighteenth century, Stableford continues, the lack of "narrative devices capable of opening up the imaginative frontiers of space and time" remained a defect of the genre. Nonetheless, the introduction of "cosmic tours" allowed a "hybrid sub-genre, fusing religious and scientific fantasies, usually incorporating utopian and eschatological[23] imagery within the same framework" (16-17). During the nineteenth century, the term "science fiction" was finally coined by the writer William Wilson in 1851, inspired by Robert Hunt's *Poetry of Science* (19).[24] Two central figures were of great importance during this period: Edgar Allan Poe and H.G. Wells. Poe's efforts to exalt "the wonders of science," regarded as an attempt to find "appropriate narrative frameworks" (18-19), and Wells' awareness of "the necessity of replacing dreams as a means of exploring possible futures" (24) were key aspects in the development of the genre in the following century.

The second period of science fiction history, at the beginning of the twentieth century, goes from 1926 to 1960. Brian Attebery identifies this second period of sf history as "the magazine era" because it is through pulp magazines that science fiction started to spread and reach a broader audience, mainly in the United States, giving sf the quality of a "distinctive genre." Pulp magazines, Attebery continues, helped to shape sf, both in terms of form and subject matter (32). Hugo Gernsback, who is considered the founder of science

[23] According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary eschatology is "a branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world or of humankind" ("Eschatology").

[24] Hugo Gernsback in the 1930s would revive the term.

fiction as a genre in the United States, limited the fictional contents of his magazine while defining the genre, re-coining the term “science fiction” in 1929 and trying “not only to educate but also to convert his readers to the habit of thinking about the future” (33-34). There are two different eras of the sf magazine. The first era was characterized by the creation of “space operas”[25] and by the “thought-variant story,” which referred to “a particular blend of philosophical speculation and fiction” (37). The Campbell[26] era, which begins in 1937, is known as the second era of the sf magazine, and it was during this time that the first informal criticism was born at the hands of fans, who helped shaped science fiction as a genre (37-38). During the 1940s, the major advances in science fiction were the focus on “fundamental questions about society and the mind” (39) and coherent, efficient and believable prose (40), designs that enriched the genre. In the 1950s, sf was finally considered a consolidated genre due to the authors’ “more personal voices and visions” and the publication of paperback novels (41-42). Attebery affirms that by the end of the 1950s “the best sf magazine was comparable to fiction published in more traditional literary venues, and readers were already getting a taste of the experiments that were to characterize the next decade” (44). However, even if sf was beginning to be related to

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[25] According to Attebery, space operas’ “characterization was perfunctory and plots were often thinly disguised westerns, mysteries or lost-world romances” (34).

[26] John W. Campbell, Jr. was the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction,* one of the first and most important sf magazines of all times.

mainstream fiction, it still had a long way to go before being openly accepted by the canon.[27]

The third period in science fiction history, called the New Wave (1960-1980), marked the end of the pulp magazine and gave way to new concerns. According to Damien Broderick, the sixties represented an era in which people's "perception was of a world facing imminent destruction" ascribed by global wars, particularly in the West (48). The New Wave movement was "a reaction against genre exhaustion but never quite formalized and often repudiated by its major exemplars" (49). Broderick believes that by the early sixties, "much sf had become complacent, recycling with minor modification a small number of tropes and ideas" (50), which led other critics to argue "that the driving impulse of Golden Age sf was a 'quest for transcendence'" (Alexei and Cory Panshin qtd. in Broderick 50). One of the major concerns of the time was, in Broderick's words, that "much of the 'experimental' sf of the 1960s took a gloomy cast, while the continuing mainstream of commercial sf was distinctly upbeat . . ." (55).

Another important element in this period was the "existential vertigo" as key to "New Wave textuality, sometimes masked as an obsession with *entropy*, the tendency of all organized matter and energy to degrade towards meaningless noise and inanition" (56). The decade of the 1970s finally saw ample public acceptance and the consolidation of the genre while sf readers enjoyed the fusion between elements from Old and New Wave

[27] It is important to recall that the canon has always been a very exclusive institution. Literature that does not follow certain accepted "standards" is not considered "worth reading." Science fiction and female writers share a common trait regarding the canon: both have been discriminated and both have struggled to be taken seriously.

enhanced by techniques that belong to general fiction and movies, among others (59). The changes that the world was going through, including political movements, such as feminism, were criticized by sf writers, and women writers' interest regarding the roles of female heroes, among other concerns, started to increase (Attebery qtd. in Broderick 59). It was also during this era that criticism regarding sf was at last taken seriously by scholars, and academic journals started to emerge (61). While the science fiction of the 1960s experienced a late crisis of modernism which opened its texts "to a radically *epistemological* or *writerly* invitation to endless reinterpretation," Broderick argues, the sf of the 1970s and beyond was directed towards a "postmodern gesture: deep *ontological* doubt, a profound questioning of every reality claim; both, Broderick concludes, will no longer apply to sf of the following decades (62).

The last period to be analyzed ranges from 1980 to 2000. According to critic John Clute, there are two sides through which this era may be understood. The first one is the positive side: science fiction as a consolidated genre; the second one is its negative side: the elements that made science fiction a genre were making it "indistinguishable from the world it attempted to adumbrate, to signify . . . to *differ* from" (64). During this time, written sf had to compete with other means of entertainment such as TV, films and computer games, and even written sf—which at the time consisted of spin-offs from other versions—was not necessarily considered sf literature (64).[28] In spite of this phenomenon, there were independent works that suffered "a transformation of the genre due to ageing" (65).

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[28] Traditionally, some movies or TV series are based on books while spin-offs were movies or TV series that were later turned into books.

By the year 2000, Clute continues, science fiction had become "an *institution* for the telling of story," an institution that had, once more, two sides: one that portrayed a future that was "pleasurable" for its readers and another one that was "complex" (65-66). Clute discusses two dynamics of change; the first one involves "a decreasing resemblance between the world we inhabit today and the future worlds advocated, with some consistency of voice and vision, in the American sf of the previous half-century" (66). In the 1980s, science fiction told stories about how the world might develop while at the end of the twentieth century the stories were directly related to the American Dream:

> In this Dream, progress was achieved through an invasive understanding of nature that led to the control of nature, through miracles of applied opportunity-grabbing science; through the penetration of frontiers; through the taming of alien peoples on other worlds; through an establishment of hierarchical centralized governances throughout the galaxy. Even as late as the twenty-first century, much routine sf assumed without argument that this form of progress remained storyable, that its fascination as a big story about visible triumphs overrode its implausibility as prophecy. (66)

Even though during the decade of the 1980s science fiction seemed to have lost its creativity and liveliness, the decade of the 1990s brought, Clute states, the second dynamic of change: Cyberpunk,[29] which was not overtly accepted by sf writers (68). In spite of this,

[29] "Cyberpunk, [is] a term coined by sf writer Bruce Bethke in 1983 to describe novels and stories about the information explosion of the 1980s (hence 'Cyber', from cybernetics), most of them picturing a dense, urban, confusing new world in which most of us will find that we have been disenfranchised from any real power (hence 'punk')" (Clute 67).

by the end of the 1990s, sf writers were still able to foresee possible futures that differed from their current world (77-78). Finally, by 2000, there was a change in the readers' mind as well: "sf's high-profile icons no longer meant now what they once meant"; there no longer are signals of "shaping advocacy" (67). In other words, what Clute discusses here is a general change of mentality since writers as well as readers were already living sf stories and that those were visible, almost tangible.

Science fiction as a genre has grown a great deal from its beginnings. The impact that it has had on different aspects of our lives—on a social and political level mainly—has led readers to reflect on the myriad future possibilities humankind may face. Even though this section offered a general view of how the science fiction genre has evolved over the years, the impact of/on female writers, female characterization and female concerns were not genuinely analyzed; the following section will offer a concrete analysis regarding these subjects.

A Brief History of Science Fiction and Feminism

Critic Helen Merrick divides the history of feminist science fiction into decades, starting in the 1950s and ending at the beginning of the twentieth century. The first two decades, the 1950s and 1960s, were characterized by a significant increase of female writers and a serious commitment to "sociocultural concerns, including a more engaged awareness of contemporary issues around sex, gender roles, race and ecology" (244). While some female writers portrayed role reversals which "parodied or criticized contemporary gendered norms through the familiar sf trope of 'defamiliarizing the familiar'"—a term that

is intrinsically related to that of "strangeness"—, others actually found a solution to the "battle of the sexes"[30] stories by portraying different forms of equality (245). Male authors portrayed "liberating examples of female characters" and introduced "considerations of sex and sexuality into sf"; nevertheless, those characters remain "'sexually dependent' whilst 'morally superior'" (245). Masculinity was associated with science and technology, resulting in "cultural anxieties about gender" while femininity was portrayed in "sweet little domestic stories" which were highly criticized but at the same time provided a real focus on female characters (245-46). The following decade—the 1960s—saw the results of the increment of female writers and female characterizations. Some texts, Merrick discusses, started to portray female characters as "fully human" as opposed to complements or reflections of masculinity. Unlike previous sf texts, the relationship between science and masculinity started to change and female characters began to be part of the equation, leaving social conventions based on biological sex aside (246).

The 1970s saw the rise of "a significant group of texts which [Joanna] Russ would later classify as 'feminist utopias'"[31] (Merrick 247). These feminist utopias would challenge and disrupt the perceived naturalness of gender, and locate the operation and proliferation of the more harmful effects of the gendered order deep within the political and cultural

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[30] These feminist utopias, what Russ called "the Battle of the Sexes" stories, portray how the battles are not won in terms of "intelligence, character, humanity, humility, foresight, courage, planning, sense, technology or even responsibility" but in terms of whom by "nature" possesses the "Sacred Objects" i.e. male genitalia (43). She adds, "I think it is clear by now that these stories are not only not written for women; they are not written about women" (51).

[31] I will analyze feminist utopias as well as feminist dystopias more extensively later in this work.

institutions of contemporary society (247-48). Some feminist utopias depicted societies where gender was a social construction, hence questioning structures which emphasize gender binarisms and promoted "freedom of sexual expression . . . in order to 'separate sexuality from questions of ownership, reproductions and social structure'" (248). Other utopias discredited gendered hierarchies "by (re)constituting woman as human, in many cases by postulating a woman-only world, in order to provide women with full access to the range of experiences and emotions associated with humanity" (248).[32] The purpose of these utopias was to demonstrate that in only-women societies, women were allowed "to behave simply as human beings" (Suzy McKee Charnas qtd. in. Merrick 248).

During the 1980s, feminist sf texts continued to scrutinize gender relationships "through dystopian visions, role reversals and worlds which split men and women into separate societies" (Merrick 249). In the mid-'80s, Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale;* this novel, according to Merrick, was considered the result of the "re-emergence of sociobiology [that] was one discourse about gender that fed into the idea of the 1980s as a period of conservatism and backlash . . ." (249). Reproductive technologies was another fundamental theme during this decade; some female writers recurred to processes such as gynogenesis,[33] in which women were in total "control over a technology of reproduction," to criticize the implication of reproduction in current societies (249-50). The twenty-first

[32] Some examples are Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time,* Le Guin's *The Dispossessed,* and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man.*

[33] The term refers to a "type of reproduction, [gynogenesis] in which the sperm produced by males do not unite with the haploid [one that works independently] female egg but merely activate it to begin development. The result is haploid females" (*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*).

century continued to develop the concerns of the previous decades, particularly of the 1970s, regarding "gendered concerns with postcolonial theory, ecological politics and radical critiques of (Western) science" (251).

Science Fiction: Gender and Literary Devices

According to Helen Merrick, because of its focus on science and technology, science fiction has generally been considered primarily a masculine field, excluding women and representing them as the *others*. This argument served as an excuse to justify the absence of women in some sf texts, and at the same time, as a device to reinforce "the androcentric culture of the (Western) scientific 'world view'" (241). According to Brian Attebery, science narrative has always been told "in sexual terms"; while masculinity is represented by "knowledge, innovation and perception," femininity is represented as "nature, the passive object of exploration" (qtd. in Merrick 241). Merrick argues that the "what if" question is related to concerns regarding "subjectivity, knowledge, 'Nature' and gender" (242). While masculinity was clearly exposed in sf texts from the beginning, femininity was somewhat hidden, even if not entirely absent. Merrick argues that "[c]oncerns about 'women in sf' developed from the 'sex in sf' question . . . to intersect with (and be partially absorbed by) feminist narratives from the 1970s to the present" (242-43). Matriarchal societies have been the only place in sf where female characters have had a central role and have been able to rule, which reveals, Merrick claims, "a latent anxiety about changes and threats to

the gendered order in a much more obvious fashion than the majority of sf" (243).[34] The problem with this kind of matriarchies, Merrick continues, is the creation of societies that are not able to establish "a functioning 'scientifically' progressive society" based on the assumption that science is not a feminine feature (243).

In spite of this, some sf texts vindicated women's role. Female writer C. L. Moore provides the science fiction genre with another improvement regarding gender; in her stories, she emphasizes the power of female sexuality and offers awareness about issues such as "embodiment, female beauty, power and what it means to be 'human,' by uncoupling 'femininity' from the biologically female body" (244). The decade of the 1980s, as mentioned before, saw the beginnings of Cyberpunk, which was seen as "a return to a 'purer' form of hard sf, apparently without cognizance of the impact of radical social movements such as feminism." The sub-genre helped to broaden "promises of an escape from the body (and thus modernist notions of gendered subjectivity), and the presence of strong female characters, the dominance of the mind/body dualism in cyberpunk serves to reinforce the associated gender binaries" (250). However, several female writers criticized the "'masculine' relations to technology" and others "move[d] beyond the heterosexism of cyberpunk . . . confront[ing] the gendered issue of embodiment in a space that privileges the (masculinized) 'mind' over (feminized) 'body'" (250).

Feminism within literature has always been complex, and its relationship with science fiction has not been an exception. The decade of the 1960s, predominantly,

[34] Modern sf texts tend to deconstruct the negative "'woman dominant' stories through ironic or satirical role reversals" (Merrick 243-44).

represented an important step for the feminist movement towards the improvement of women's lives. Science fiction, influenced by the feminist movement, projected future-setting utopias that intended to denounce and eradicate—at least on paper—what society was facing at the time in which they were written. Veronica Hollinger claims that even though one of the major concerns of science fiction is that many critics considered it "a form of escapist popular fiction with little aesthetic appeal and even less political relevance," sf has a "proven capacity for articulating and exploring feminist theoretical models in original and challenging ways" (131). In this respect, feminist sf resembles mainstream feminist literature; the difference, as we will see, lies in the tools and narrative techniques that science fiction uses.

Hollinger comments on different critical models and their relevance to the genre, concluding that regardless of the theory being applied, all feminist ideologies follow the same principle: resistance against "self-representations of the masculinist cultural text that traditionally offers itself as the universal expression of a homogeneous 'human nature' [which] has been [heterosexist] white, male and middle class" (125). Women in science fiction, whether female writers or female characters, have gone through the same difficulties that other women have experienced in other genres. Based on this premise, Hollinger refers to what a feminist reading of a science fiction text should be: "[it] is not just reading *about* women; it is reading *for* women" (126). She adds,

> Analogous to feminist reading, feminist sf is not simply sf about women; it is sf written in the interests of women–however diversely those interests are defined by individual writers. It is a potent tool for feminist imaginative projects

> that are the necessary first steps in undertaking the cultural and social transformations that are the aims of the feminist political enterprise. (128)

Feminist theoretical models, what Hollinger defines as "abstract constructions of the subject, of representation, of sexual difference" are responsible for "the development of the new worlds and new futures of the genre" (129). These "new" worlds and futures—influenced by feminist theory—became thought experiments that did not predict the future but revealed present day reality (Le Guin qtd. in Hollinger 129). In a patriarchal culture where the *others* are not recognized, Hollinger argues, feminist theory "defamiliarize[s][35] certain taken-for-granted aspects of ordinary human reality, denaturalizing situations of historical inequity and/or oppression that otherwise may appear inevitable to us" (129).

Hollinger argues that despite its characterization as a literature of change, sf has been unsuccessful in representing "the historical contingency and cultural conventionality of many of our ideas about sexual identity and desire, about gendered behaviour and about the 'natural' roles of women and men" (126). A feminist reading, then, analyzes the reasons why those changes have not occurred in "the future," sf's most common setting. Nevertheless, Hollinger argues, there is potential in sf to dissolve the constructions regarding femininity, sex and gender by using corresponding strategies such as "a male point-of-view character and the association of the feminine with the monstrous" (127). In the words of Teresa de Lauretis, a feminist reading helps to "[tell] new stories so as to

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[35] "The concept of defamiliarization–of making strange–has also, of course, long been associated with sf" (Hollinger 129).

inscribe into the picture of reality characters and events and resolutions that were previously invisible, untold, unspoken (and so unthinkable, unimaginable, 'impossible')" (qtd. in Hollinger 128). These women's stories have mainly taken the form of utopias and dystopias.

Science Fiction: Utopias and Dystopias

While some critics consider utopias and dystopias opposite sub-genres of sf, others see them as "siblings" and as such sometimes difficult to differentiate. According to Dunja M. Mohr, there are certain factors that differentiate literary utopia from other utopian imaginings. Literary utopia is related to "imaginations of better worlds and ideal societies" which depict "religious concepts of a lost time and place . . . fantastic fabulations, voyages, folktales and legends . . . political concepts . . . and practiced communitarianism . . ." (13). The difference with utopian imaginings is that literary utopias focus on "sociopolitical themes and changes" and solutions constructed in the form of "alternate possibilities to change social reality" (13-14). Literary utopia tends to satirize the actual politics with the purpose of changing them even when politics are not "grounded in reality but in the imaginary" (14). In the words of Northrop Frye, literary utopia "transcends reality and breaks the bounds of existing order, as opposed to 'ideology,' which expresses the existing order" (qtd. in. Mohr 14-15). This classic perspective of utopia, Mohr continues, has two major characteristics: on the one hand, it represents "a visionary reform" and a perfect system; on the other hand, its criticism is based not only on the author's sociopolitical reality (or the reader's) but also on "speculation and hypothesis" (15).

The impossibility of offering a "valid, single, and stable definition of utopia" lies in the description of utopia as "flexible and . . . subject to changing definitions" (15-16). Nevertheless, Darko Suvin's definition back in 1973 is considered today one of the most accurate and the one that defines its relationship with science fiction:

> Utopia is the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on *estrangement* arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis. (qtd. in Mohr 15; emphasis added)

The general purpose of utopia is "to move readers to a new critical awareness" by means of "the reader's identification with the protagonist/narrator" (17). As discussed before, a utopia reflects the concerns of the author's (and the reader's) current society, and it is her/his construction of an alternative society that will offer a possible solution for those concerns. At this point, the reader plays an important role in the construction of these solutions since readers "compare the *defamiliarized* literary construct with the social reality in which they live . . ." (17; emphasis added). Both concepts, estrangement and defamiliarization, as seen before, represent science fiction's major characteristics.

One of the main and perhaps the most famous utopia ever written is Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516),[36] which belongs to the category of classic utopias. Classic utopias,

[36] According to Dunja M. Mohr, More's *Utopia* (1516) surpasses Plato's *The Republic* (around 360 B.C.) as one of the most famous utopias for the fact of coining the term for the genre and for describing an "imaginary ideal state," foreshadowing "the spatial locus utopists used as a principal setting for alternative societies" (18).

according to Edward James, consist of accounts in which a male character discovered a new land (in another planet or in the future) and encountered an "ideal society" (219-20). Other important characteristics of these early utopias are the lack of characterization, lack of plot development—lack of process and progress—, an unchanging, static society, and a narrative structure that reflected "narrative conventions of the travelogue in the Renaissance" (James 222; Mohr 17-18). At the end of the nineteenth century, there were major changes in the narrative patterns of utopia. First, most utopias changed their main view from religious (Catholic or Protestant) to different forms of socialism (James 220). Second, the traditional figure of the traveler evolved into a more developed character, not just an observer. Finally, "the popular sentimental romance pattern" was introduced by Edward Bellamy (Mohr 18). Because of the latter, there was a shift from a focus on the perfect society to a focus on the individual, which allowed unlimited characterization and plot, leaving behind the static feature that previous utopias had (18).

The 1970s marked a new phase for science fiction utopias as a result of several social movements that started at the end of the 1960s—particularly feminism—but also including "the Civil Rights movement, the New Left, the ecological movement, the anti-war protests of the early 1970s and the emerging gay and lesbian movements." Critical utopias[37] (modern utopias) refer to utopias that depict not only the concerns of the society in which the texts are written but also "possible utopian alternatives" (James 225). According to James, many sf utopias create more questions than possible solutions while

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[37] A term used by critic Tom Moylan.

others present utopias "as a natural result of human progress" (226). James makes a clear distinction between traditional and modern utopias:

> The traditional utopia is about envisioning ways in which human society might be reorganized on earth. Its mechanisms are legislation, education or institutional changes, occasionally changes in technology or environmental management. But the sf writer has not been prepared to accept such a limited view of human development. Why should we not use technology to remove drudgery, and to provide all material needs? (227)

On the other hand, modern utopias portray "a more perfect society to be the result of evolution and technology" (227).[38] In modern utopias, therefore, portrayals of societies depend on the changes experienced by that society, resulting in "just as many dystopian outcomes as utopian ones." James concludes his article by saying that the relevancy of sf writers—as well as theologians—is that they raise questions regarding the meaning of life and the destiny of human beings (228).

Once the construction of "an ideal society, a better world" became an illusion, utopia was "conceived as an unattainable, concrete political act" (Mohr 19). The genre of utopia took a turn in the twentieth century towards "pessimism and cynicism" due to "the horrors of total war, of genocide and of totalitarianism" (James 219). Some utopias turned out to be dystopias, "oppressive societies, either because of the tyranny of the 'perfect'

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[38] The result of evolution and technology led to the creation of "technological utopianism" a "term used by Segal in *Technological Utopianism in American Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), a study of the optimistic reliance in the USA on technology for social improvement" (James 229).

system over the will of the individual, or because of the difficulty of stopping individuals or elites from imposing authority over the majority, or, indeed, over minorities" (220).[39] As Mohr states,

> As the anxieties of the historical present became more and more pressing, the utopian genre increasingly veered towards negative representations, projecting negative worlds (dystopia) or, in an enthusiastic belief in the future technological developments, technologized worlds (sf). (21)

Therefore, utopias did not disappear in the twentieth century; they just evolved into new forms, and both forms—utopias and dystopias—"practically became a subcategory of science fiction" (Roemer qtd. in Mohr 21). Suvin also believes that "utopia [and in the same logic dystopia] is not a genre but the sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction" (qtd. in Mohr 21; brackets from original quote). These new forms portrayed the "sinister side" of utopianism (221). In its more general sense, the term dystopia refers to a society characterized by oppression, agony, tribulations and the like. The term was supposedly coined by John Stuart Mill in 1868, and it literally means "a non-existent bad place." Among the many existing terms that refer to the negative portrayals of utopia, the most common three are "dystopia, anti-utopia, and utopian satire" (Mohr 28). Mohr offers a clear account regarding the similarities and differences between dystopia, satire and anti-utopia:

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[39] On this matter, Mohr comments, "The violations of all ethical norms and the unspeakable atrocities committed in the First and Second World Wars and by totalitarian systems . . . had an enormous, shattering impact on the individual's view of the world and on writer's imagination. Visibly, these demonstrations of the horrible potentialities of centralized governments combined with advanced technology changed utopian literature and resulted in dystopia that extrapolates from the current trends and thus intimates visions of totalitarian, barbaric societies to come" (31).

> Satire shares a strong link with dystopia in that both share a critical view of the author's actual society. . . . Dystopia differs from utopian satire as it warns of future social developments and calls its readers to action, whereas the utopian satire/parody mocks utopia. . . . Anti-utopia misleadingly implies that its primary aim is solely to attack the concept of utopia; it connotes a mere negation of utopia. . . . In contrast, the widely accepted term dystopia denotes a broader concept, allowing criticism of utopia, but also directly deals with contemporary social evils and posits thus an independent term far less linked with utopia/eutopia. (28-29)

One of the most important critiques taken on by dystopian sf novels deals with technological advances. Modern dystopias describe "an advanced totalitarian state dependent upon a massive technological apparatus—in short a technotopia" (Beauchamp qtd. in Mohr 30) as a result of a shift from spirituality to unquestionable scientific belief and the techniques for social control. Dystopia criticizes this technological progress because its technology is considered "dehumanizing and destructive"; technology is, in other words, a tool for oppression.

The concept of utopia—in its most general sense—is optimistic because it portrays an ideal and perfect society, and a solution(s) for a common current concern(s). However, the concept of utopia also refers to "something unattainable, an illusion that can never be realized" (Mohr 11); hence, it also includes an intrinsic pessimism. According to Dunja M. Mohr,

> Originally, the philosophical and political meaning of utopia was not only aligned with a more positive, though equally unattainable connotation—denoting a vision of an ideal, a "perfect" society, whereas utopia's alter ego dystopia connotes a much worse, bad society—but could also be pinpointed in a definite realm: that of literature and politics. (12)

Dystopia as a genre saw its beginnings in the twentieth century, along with "the rise of technology, evolutionary theories, and Social Darwinism" (29). Although both utopia and dystopia portray the author's (and reader's) dissatisfaction with the present,[40] dystopia terrifies its readers by presenting the ideal and perfect society transformed into a totalitarian state (27). Dystopia, as opposed to utopia, presents a warning for the near future based on projection of the present. In spite of this, Mohr discusses, both utopia and dystopia share the same purpose: "sociopolitical change by means of the aesthetic representation of a paradigm change" (28).

There are other characteristics that distinguish dystopia from utopia. At the end of the eighteenth century, there was a shift from space to time in the setting. According to Mohr, the new setting of utopia was no longer physical but placed in the future (19), which exaggerated contemporary tendencies by presenting a state that was intolerably realistic and therefore pushing the reader to act by the use of eschatological scenes (32). Regarding characterization, there is also a major difference. While the narrators/protagonists of

[40] "Dystopia matches utopia's formulation of humankind's highest hopes by voicing humankind's deepest fears" (Mohr 28). These fears, according to Beauchamp, refer to the fear of utopia and technology (qtd. in Mohr 29).

classic utopias yearn to leave those ideal, perfect societies to return to their own societies to share their experiences, the narrators/protagonists of dystopias' yearning is to escape from the oppressive state in order to survive (32). Their desire to escape the totalitarian state is their only mechanism of survival. According to Beauchamp, collectivism is exalted whilst individualism is repressed, portraying the "I-ness" as the enemy (qtd. in Mohr 32). In dystopia, those who dare oppose the state will suffer the most terrible consequences. Mihailescu believes that "[d]ystopias are stories that contrast the failure of the main character with the unstoppable advance of society towards totalitarianism" (qtd. in Mohr 32). Characters in totalitarian states are deprived of their own identities and under constant surveillance, which is not surprising, due to dystopia's most recurrent topics, which are

> nationalism, militarism, slavery, exploitation, class antagonism, racism, barbarism, enforced and controlled gender relations, rape, overpopulation, drug dependence, sexual perversion, pogroms [massacre or persecution], degeneration, nuclear devastation, and increasingly also catastrophes such as (terminal) ecological pollution, and authoritarian/totalitarian regimes that oppress the masses. (Mohr 33)

These characteristics, along with media control, limited or absent access to information, knowledge and literacy, and language as a power device, make the reader an active participant in the reading process because it is her/his role to compare and contrast her/his actual society with the fictional one (Mohr 33). The final feature that differentiates utopia from dystopia in terms of characterization is the transformation from "the utopian

traveler . . . into the dystopian rebel, [and] the utopian guide . . . into a representative of the oppressive system" (34). In classic dystopias, Mohr claims, the protagonist starts as a common member of the society who blindly accepts the system. Once they become political awaken, these male protagonists[41] usually rebel against it but are at the end hunted so they can return to their initial position. One of the reasons why this kind of protagonist revolts against the system is in the form of a love plot; this happens when he falls in love with a female rebel (34).

Science Fiction: Female Utopias and Dystopias

According to Mohr, at the end of the nineteenth century a group of women authors "began to recognize utopia's potential for feminist purposes, as both feminism and utopia share an interest in the (narrative) interstices and (narrative) function of space and time," noting that "Your-topia is not necessarily My-topia" (21). Stimpson sees feminism, in the twentieth century, as "a primary influence on utopian thinking and speculative fiction" (qtd. in Mohr 21).[42] Several aspects led female writers to condemn male utopias. On the one hand, ideas regarding the liberation of women, equal rights and debates regarding the "women's role and (sexual) nature, demands for improved property and inheritance rights,

[41] In most classic dystopias, the protagonists are men.

[42] Mohr differs with previous descriptions given to the term "speculative fiction." For her, utopia, dystopia and sf are analogous terms. The alternative term speculative fiction, proposed by Robert A. Heinlein in the 1940s and later adapted by Judith Merril in 1966, was first used for two major reasons correspondingly: "to denote sf that extrapolates from known rather than unknown science" and "to describe sf not predominantly dealing with science" (27).

and equal citizenship,[43] provided the foundation for a strong critique of male utopias (Mohr 22). On the other hand, the analysis of the male-dominated genre provided the theoretical basis for its own critique.

According to Mohr, the setting of these utopias was a Westernized, androcentric, perfect design where the oppressive situations relating to race and gender were not improved in the probable futures. Female characters, whose roles remained traditional,[44] Mohr argues, continued to be marginalized, and they were portrayed as flat, passive and silent characters. As a response to this, women writers "pushed women's position into the center of utopian literature, questioned gender roles, and created futures and utopian visions of non-patriarchal societies with free women" (22). Mohr argues that early female utopias—in the nineteenth century—portrayed matriarchal or all-female societies that were centered "around motherhood as woman's ultimate fulfillment," which were considered by critics as non-feminist and static. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that female utopias changed from static to dynamic by introducing strong and voiced heroines and an "interest in transformational politics" (23). They acknowledged "male institutions as a major cause of present social ills" and "women as sole arbitraries of their reproductive functions" (Gearhart qtd. in Mohr 23). Some of the new all-female societies' reproductive methods have replaced men's role in reproduction, and women are able to maintain their system by resisting male attacks. "Politics in feminism," Mohr comments,

[43] These ideas were readopted from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) (Mohr 22).

[44] Traditional roles such as "housekeeper, child-bearer, and mother within the private sphere" (Mohr 22).

"denotes the *distribution of (sexual) power* in society, . . . or gendered power relations of language . . . allow[ing] fluidity and progress" (23).

During the decade of the 1970s, the utopian genre was "virtually reinvented" by feminist authors, and "the conventions of male/female relations" were radically criticized (Hollinger 128). This phenomenon, Russ argues, is "obviously contemporaneous with the women's movement itself" (133). Russ believes that the term "utopia" is actually misapplied to what the stories during this time portrayed; the term "feminist," on the other hand, seems more appropriate since many of the societies portrayed in the stories "are conceived by the author as better in explicitly feminist terms and for explicitly feminist reasons" (134). According to Russ, there are three different categories regarding sex roles in science fiction:

> The status quo (which will be carried into the future without change), role reversals (seen as evil), and fiction in which women (usually few) are shown working as equals alongside men; but the crucial questions about the rest of the society (e.g. personal relations and who's doing the work women usually do) are not answered. (135)

As opposed to "the battle of the sexes" stories, most feminist utopias, particularly the ones written by female authors, offer "answers and remedies" (136) for those unanswered questions:

> Classless, without government, ecologically minded, with a strong feeling for the natural world, quasi-tribal in feeling and quasi-familial in structure, the societies of these stories are *sexually permissive* in terms I suspect many

> contemporary male readers might find both unspectacular and a little baffling, but which would be quite familiar to the radical wing of the feminist movement, since the point of the permissiveness is not to break taboos but to separate sexuality from questions of ownership, reproduction, and social structure. Monogamy, for example, is not an issue, since family structure is a matter of parenting or economics, not the availability of partners. (139)

Even though most feminist utopias are portrayed as pessimistic, Russ argues, there is another function to these societies: "that of expressing the joys of female bonding, which– like freedom and access to the public world—are in short supply for many women in the real world" (142). Early feminist utopias are reactive, revealing not only what women lack in society but also what is wrong with our own society (144-45). According to Mohr, they also depict an equitable distribution of power and family duties (such as motherhood and reproduction, which are criticized as systems of oppression and seen not as exclusive to one woman but many, or even men), gender equality (sexuality is separated from questions of ownership and reproduction), and non-aggressive, non-hierarchical future societies that challenge patriarchy (24-25).

Traditionally, classic dystopias portrayed male protagonists who at some point would defy the regime that they belonged to. In this type of plots, female characters were usually female rebels whom the protagonist fell in love with. According to Mohr, the characterization of women in dystopia—particularly as written by male authors—portrays them as simple accessories for men. In a totalitarian system, women are generally passive and submissive, and any individual bonding and/or sexual intercourse (with an emotional

attachment) is forbidden (34). Mohr argues that the protagonist is left with three different options: "escaping to a colony outside of the system's reach, disappearing into an underground movement, or openly confronting the regime. The latter results in the protagonist's inevitable death, either by suicide or by execution" (34).

According to Mohr, the first female dystopias—written in the 1930s—described totalitarian states where individuals lack any sense of identity and ego—matters that were going to be explored broadly by female writers in the 1960s from a feminist perspective (34). Mohr argues that along with "the beginnings of the Women's Liberation movement and the revival of literary utopia in the late 1960s, renewed interest in the genre's dystopian sibling was aroused." Female writers then started to challenge "the traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity and explored sexual politics." In the 1970s, for instance, some of them questioned heterosexuality as "the perpetuator of women's subjugation."[45] More female writers, Mohr claims, "were drawn to dystopia by the backlash of the 1980s" that reduced social benefits, restricted reproductive and abortion rights "to push women back into the kitchen," and blamed feminism and feminists who were seen by some women as their enemies (35). According to Nixon, female writers portrayed dystopian futures "in which women's rights had been extinguished . . . women were valued only as breeders . . . [and] technology had become the sophisticated means by which women could be successfully oppressed once again" (qtd. in Mohr 36).

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[45] Some examples are Marge Piercy's *Dance the Eagle to Sleep*, Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, and Suzy Mckee Charnas' *Walk to the End of the World*.

Female writers, according to Mohr, expose “the interrelation with questions of gender hierarchy, biological reproduction, and women’s rights; in short, with sexual politics” and present the traits that characterize a dystopia from a feminist angle: “slavery, exploitation, extreme collectivism, and oppressed individualism.” Language and power are also important topics developed in feminist dystopias, particularly a critique of “phallocentric language” (36). Among other relevant issues portrayed in feminist dystopias are “female sexuality, the female body and its abuse,” female reproduction and rape (37). According to Lefanu, feminist dystopias describe “the denial of women’s sexual autonomy . . . women are trapped by their sex, by their femaleness, and reduced from subjecthood to function” (qtd. in Mohr 36).

A final characteristic of female dystopias in science fiction is what Raffaella Baccolini calls the “persistence of hope” through oppositional strategies against hegemonic ideology (519). Genres in themselves, Baccolini argues, are culturally constructed and as such women writers use their writing as a means of expression of struggle and political resistance, making of sf (and in this case dystopia) a *subversive* genre (519-20). Universal assumptions and stereotypes are debunked, and new approaches towards identity and its relationship with themes such as “the representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality, and language” are explored. Baccolini states that [u]topia is maintained in dystopia, traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope in the story, only *outside* the story: only by considering dystopia as a warning we can as readers hope to escape such a dark future. Nevertheless, she argues, there are some dystopias that by means of “resisting closure, allow readers and protagonists to hope: the

ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work" (520). According to Baccolini, critical dystopias such as *The Handmaid's Tale* reject "the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel," which "opens a space of contestation and opposition . . ." and portray "a culture of memory" that is part of the "social project of hope" (520-21). The ultimate purpose of a critical dystopia is not to have a happy ending but to understand and analyze how the characters "deal with their choices and responsibilities" and therefore move towards a possibility of change (521).

Science fiction has undergone many changes over the years, but it still remains one of the most controversial genres. The ability to portray different futures and the possibility to explore human beings' concerns and anxieties regarding these futures are sf's most significant traits. Similar to the difficulty of tracing back the source of the genre and defining proper strategies for its analysis, the controversy surrounding its definition represents one of the ongoing debates within this genre. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is the perfect example of a classic dystopia: a futuristic setting that depicts a matriarchy, though ruled by men; female characters who continue to be oppressed and marginalized; and a powerless, voiceless female protagonist who struggles to survive a totalitarian state. Atwood challenges traditional representations of female heroines in dystopia to show how a female protagonist is able to survive, against all odds, a society that objectifies her.

B. Power, Discourse, and Control

> The relationship between rationalization and excesses of political power is evident. And we should not need to wait for bureaucracy or concentration camps to recognize the existence of such relations.
>
> Michel Foucault, *Power*

Power and the way it may be exercised over a population has several, distinctive faces. On the one hand, power is necessary in any society, for governments use power to ensure a peaceful and secure environment for their citizens. Unfortunately, there is a fine line between using power to protect and control the basic needs of a population and abusing power to control and manipulate a society for the benefit of a few. When that line is crossed, one encounters dictatorships, totalitarian states, and the like: societies where the inhabitants become powerless, and those who hold higher positions are the ones who have absolute control over the former. The history of humanity has given us multiple examples of the direct consequences of power abuse, Nazi Germany being the most notorious one.

According to Michel Foucault, power is “a certain type of relation between individuals” (*Politics* 83). In order for these relations to occur, individuals need to have freedom, “however little [their] freedom may be,” because it is this freedom, or the illusion of freedom, that is “subjected to power . . . [and] submitted to government” (84). When these relations of power are established, mechanisms of power become possible: “Mechanisms of power are an intrinsic part of all these relations and, in a circular way, are both their effect and cause” (*Security* 17). Moreover, Foucault states, “The characteristic

feature of power is that some men can more or less entirely determine other men's conduct—but never exhaustively or coercively" (*Politics* 83).[46] In order to "determine other men's conduct," power requires mechanisms to act upon individuals, and one of the main mechanisms is the use of discourses.

Several mechanisms of control seek to restrain individuals through the use of discourses; the most common ones include the discourse for the benefit of all or common good, fear, gender, sexuality, and religion, among others. "[I]n any society," Michel Foucault asserts, "there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse" (*Power/Knowledge* 93). Some of these discourses have been accepted on the basis of tradition. Others, however, have been forced onto societies with the belief that the measures taken are the best for the common good. Many times unchallenged, these discourses become widely accepted and part of the everyday life of a population, for power is found inside the minds of individuals: "under the form of representation, acceptance, or interiorization" (*Politics* 119). Michel Foucault develops two major concepts regarding the use of power in societies, namely *biopolitics* and *panopticism*. The two concepts are related to each other, and they both seek to control every social, political, and economic aspect of a population.

[46] I will challenge this assertion later in this work, for power in totalitarian states and dystopia seeks to achieve full control over its subjects.

Biopolitics and Discipline

In his book *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction,* Foucault asserts that "[f]or a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death." If the sovereign's life was threatened, "he could exercise a direct power over the offender's life: as punishment, the latter would be put to death" (135). Nevertheless, this kind of power—and Foucault compares it with its modern form—"is a dissymmetrical one" because "[t]he sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring." Power, then, was "essentially a right of seizure": the sovereign's right to take (136). This mechanism of power, the right to decide life and death, changed over time and became not the exclusive right of the sovereign but that of the social body. Foucault argues, "Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital." Thus, under the premise that "guarantee[s] an individual's continued existence," states have justified genocide and wars over time (137).

In the seventeenth century, the mechanisms that helped control individuals in terms of power over life evolved in two forms: the first one was "centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the disciplines: an *anatomo-politics of the human body*." The second category "focused on

the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity. . . . Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population"* (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 139). Overall, the first of these two categories—*the body as a machine*—aims for the control of individuals and individuals' bodies. The main purpose of this mechanism is to discipline[47] subjects so they behave and act according to what the state requires.[48] However, the second category—*the species body*—aims at the regulation and control of populations: mass control. By supervising the health of a population, for instance, the state assures productive, useful members of society. By assuring productive, useful members, the state is able to grow and develop into a functioning state.

Biopower,[49] then, in the words of Foucault, refers to "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species" (*Security* 16). As a political strategy, governments make use of biopower to "[achieve] the subjugation of bodies and the control of

[47] It is important to clarify that under Foucault's view, to discipline does not require any kind of violence. In fact, institutions such as the school discipline individuals by educating them.

[48] I will discuss Foucault's ideal disciplinary system in the following section.

[49] Foucault focuses on the relevancy of biopower for the development of capitalism and the economy of a state. However, as I will analyze later in this work, even though the functioning of power in totalitarian states is based on the same regulations of population (birth and mortality mainly), they differ in purpose.

populations" (*The History of Sexuality* 140). Ultimately, what biopower looks for is "a normalizing society . . . centered on life" (144). These two forms of control, *the body as machine* and *the species body,* Foucault states, joined "in the form of concrete arrangements . . . would go to make up the great technology of power in the nineteenth century: the deployment of sexuality would be one of them, and one of the most important" (140). Foucault concludes that "it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body" (143). The following section will focus on the Panopticon as a disciplinary system that controls individuals and individuals' bodies.

Panopticism

The idea of being constantly observed as a mechanism of power and control has been extensively discussed, but it is Michel Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, who best examines the concept of panopticism. Foucault starts his discussion by providing the example of a series of measures taken in Europe at the end of the seventeenth century when the plague appeared. In order to stop the plague from spreading, there was "a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death," and there were intendants and syndics who kept the streets under strict surveillance to assure people would stay in their houses. The syndic, who acted as a guard, locked the doors from the outside and the intendant kept the keys "until the end of the quarantine." However, the inhabitants of the town were not the only ones affected by this prohibition; the syndics outside were not allowed to leave their posts either because if they did so, they would "be

condemned to death" (195). Those outside the houses (the syndics and intendants) were in charge of observing the actions of those who were confined in their houses, and, at the same time, the syndics and intendants were observed by other town representatives (magistrates and mayors): "This surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration, reports from the syndics to the intendants, from the intendants to the magistrates or mayor" (196). At the end of the day, every person in town was observed by others. The control of individuals in this particular town was possible due to two clear mechanisms of power: meticulous surveillance and an intrinsic fear caused by the effects of both the plague and disobeying the magistrates' rules—the true representatives of power.

Foucault believes this state of constant supervision constitutes a "disciplinary mechanism." He states,

> This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead—all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (*Discipline* 197)

As a disciplinary mechanism, this model reaches two clear objectives: obedience and unlimited power. The imposition of these measures, as a direct consequence of the plague,

is strictly related to a discourse of fear based on strict surveillance. Fear forces the citizens to stay inside their houses to avoid the plague and the punishment, which in both cases may end up in death. Similarly, fear forces the syndics, intendants, and guards to fulfill their roles. Indeed, fear is what determines the actions and behavior of those who lack true power, and surveillance is the tool that makes it all possible. All individuals are controlled both mentally and physically through this mechanism. The "rulers," Foucault argues, "dreamt of the state of plague" because "the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life . . . assured the capillary functioning of power" (198-199) This hierarchical figure worked perfectly because individuals were imprisoned, observed, controlled, and, at the same time, they were being trained into "a disciplined society" (198) because, let us not forget, the Panopticon also functions as a laboratory that trains individuals (203).

By the nineteenth century, Foucault claims, similar "space[s] of exclusion" started to control individuals, including "the psychiatric asylum, the penitentiary, the reformatory, the approved school and, to some extent, the hospital." In these institutions, control was exercised "according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution (who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.)" (*Discipline* 199). Once this concept was introduced into several institutions, and individuals were categorized according to those who were eligible to be part of a society

and those who were not, these institutions resorted to different forms to educate (re-educate) those subjects who needed to be reinserted in society.

Foucault develops the concept of panopticism, a constant state of surveillance, after analyzing Jeremy Bentham's design the Panopticon (1791),[50] an architectural structure originally thought to keep criminals and madmen, among others, under regular supervision without them knowing they were being watched. The concept was simple:

> at the periphery, an annular building, at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. (*Discipline* 200)

The organization of this structure allowed the individual(s) inside the tower to monitor each person inside the cells that surrounded the central structure. The advantage of this circular structure, for the guards, is the ability to watch every cell at any time without having to leave the central structure: "All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out

[50] The original design was never to be built; throughout the years, nevertheless, several institutions have adopted the concept of the Panopticon, and it remains one of the key elements in surveillance nowadays: "Despite years of planning and lobbying by Bentham, a Panopticon prison was never been built in his home country of England. However, Panopticon-style prisons were built in Spain, Holland, the United States, and other parts of the world, including Cuba. Additionally, many of Bentham's ideas about the need for constant surveillance exist in corrections today, including video cameras or in-home confinement with electronic monitoring systems that control and monitor an inmate's whereabouts" (Davies).

precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery" (200). Standing at the center, the supervisor or guard, shadowed by "the effect of backlighting," represents an omnipresent god-like figure: he—a male figure—is capable of supervising his hostages from his pedestal, and he represents the known/unknown "face" meant to be feared. On the other hand, the disadvantage for the prisoners is that even though they are frequently spied on by the guards, the criminals are not able to know when exactly they are being observed, which makes them part of the intended psychological game: they are forced to behave accordingly and to become their own observers—another advantage for the observers.

Once individuals are forced to monitor themselves, this "laboratory," Foucault states, "could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals" (*Discipline* 203). The Panopticon aims to educate individuals, relying on the principle that "power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so" (201). The inmate—or in this case, anyone who is under constant surveillance—becomes his/her own object of surveillance because, unable to determine when he/she is being watched, the prisoner has no other choice than to "behave" accordingly. Foucault comments,

> But the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a

> pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use. (205)

As a disciplinary mechanism that indoctrinates solely by the position of its individuals, the Panopticon fulfills one last crucial function in dystopia: seclusion.

Another advantage for the observers is that every "madman," "patient," "condemned man," "worker" or "schoolboy" is isolated from the others, prevented from having contact among themselves, remaining individuals instead of collectivities: "They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible." Based on this design, individuals are not only observed constantly but also secluded from each other. The latter feature is essential in dystopia, particularly in a totalitarian state since a state of isolation results in an inability to trust people, not even ourselves. As a result, by isolating individuals, those in control are able to magnify their power. Individuals, Foucault argues, become "object[s] of information, never subject[s] in communication," thus guaranteeing "order." Individuals, therefore, become laboratory rats, and their failure to communicate with others due to the state of absolute isolation prevents them from forming an alliance, one that might eventually rebel against a system, escaping, plotting, planning new crimes, and influencing each other negatively (Foucault, *Discipline* 200). If individuals are isolated and unable to communicate with each other, the possibilities to question, oppose, or even to escape the system greatly decrease.

As Foucault states, the Panopticon is actually more of a political system than a technological one, which attempts not only to define individuals by isolating them but also

by forcing them to consider the possibility of being under the permanent control of a major, omnipresent force. This hierarchical model defines not only those who are under control but those who have the control. Each part defines the other; each one enhances and perpetuates the role of the other. Ultimately, Foucault argues, the Panopticon "is a machinery that assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference. Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power" because everyone "can operate the machine" (Bentham qtd. in Foucault, *Discipline* 202). The Panopticon aims to define "relations of discipline" (Foucault, *Discipline* 208), and it does so without resorting to physical violence because fear acts as the catalyst that makes this mechanism successful.

Propaganda

The main purpose of propaganda, as generally understood, consists of spreading information and influencing others to make well-informed decisions. To illustrate, in a democracy, allegedly, when propaganda is used in political campaigns, people first get informed and then they are free to decide which is the best party or candidate to govern their country. In this particular context, propaganda functions as a tool to ensure a fair and honest election. The candidate that wins the election does so by having the strongest political campaign: the most original, the most creative, the most public-oriented, the one that offers the greatest benefits, and so on. The winner, as a result, is not necessarily the most appropriate candidate for the country, but the one who is capable of transmitting the best message through the use of persuasive techniques. Repetition, one of the most common techniques used in propaganda, probably becomes the core element of these

campaigns since it implies a mechanical act that sometimes creates monotony and lack of critical thinking. In other words, many people believe what they are told. Using repetition as their major device, along with other techniques such as slogans and huge billboards or posters posted all over the country, candidates remind the population of who they are and their intentions, assuring, in some cases, their triumph. In contrast, in a completely different context, a totalitarian state, for instance, propaganda is not used in order to gain a population's sympathy over a candidate but rather to force a population to obey a specific ruler or party by means of strong discourses that instigate fear. In a totalitarian state, propaganda is also used as an instrument of manipulation and control, and those who use it make others believe, for instance, that the preservation of order, peace, health, or even the human race is in their hands. If people accept this premise and become afraid of being responsible for these, they will desperately look for ways to prevent losing them, and the best thing that they can do—they are meant to believe—is to follow the guidance of those who are in charge. Unfortunately, "those who are in charge" of the country are not necessarily concerned with the preservation of any humanity other than their own, and they are capable of despicable things in order to achieve that purpose. This is how propaganda reaches its highest point, its real intention: the "preservation of humanity" becomes the preservation of a few members of a society.

In *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, Noam Chomsky discusses the role of propaganda in politics, particularly in a democracy. In an alternative conception of democracy, he claims, "the public must be barred from managing of their own affairs and the means of information must be kept narrowly and rigidly controlled"

(7); because of this, he continues, governments have been able to control entire populations, making them believe, for instance, that the reasons to engage in war are valid and must be supported. Although he differentiates between totalitarian states use of force to manipulate people and a democracy use of "nonviolent" means, the similarities between the two are surprising.

As previously mentioned, some critics have argued the impossibility of the United States ever becoming a fundamentalist, totalitarian state, such as the one portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Beauchamp, for example, believes the destruction of American democracy improbable and insists that the novel is just a fictional story intended to frighten those who want to be frightened. Nevertheless, Chomsky clearly presents evidence that the United States already is—or is heading towards—a totalitarian regime. At the turn of the twentieth century, when propaganda became an instrument of manipulation and control, the most powerful means of propaganda was created: state propaganda. Noam Chomsky exemplifies this by presenting the first attempt of the United States to use propaganda in order to convince people to engage in a war:

> This was under the Woodrow Wilson Administration. Woodrow Wilson was elected President in 1916 on the platform "Peace Without Victory." That was right in the middle of the World War I. The population was extremely pacifistic and saw no reason to become involved in a European war. The Wilson administration was actually committed to war and had to do something about it. They established a government propaganda commission, called the Creel Commission which succeeded, within six

> months, in turning a pacifist population into a hysterical, war-mongering population which wanted to destroy everything German, tear the Germans limb from limb, go to war and *save the world*. (8; emphasis added)

Political interests, among others, have led entire populations to accept the demands of their governments. As expressed by Chomsky, an entire population might be convinced of engaging into war if its single reason is to “save the world.” Needless to say, the success of this operation is due to an exceptionally detailed and meticulous “support from the media” (9). Moreover, “state propaganda,” Chomsky argues, “when supported by the educated classes and when no deviation is permitted from it, can have an intense effect. It was a lesson learned by Hitler and many others, and it has been pursued to this day” (10).

Walter Lippmann,[51] Chomsky comments, who participated in propaganda commissions, thought it was necessary to create new techniques of propaganda “to bring about agreement on the part of the public for things that they didn’t want” (11). For this to be accomplished, a small part of the population (a “specialized class”) had to take control over the state, a view that resembles, according to Chomsky, Marxist and Leninist conceptions (11-12). Following this line of thought, in a democracy those who do not participate in the matters of the state are simply “spectators,”[52] and they are tamed in order not to “destroy things” (13-14). The “spectators” are, therefore, the powerless

[51] “Walter Lippmann, . . . was the dean of American journalists, a major foreign and domestic policy critic and also a major theorist of liberal democracy” (Chomsky 11).

[52] “The bewildered herd,” as Lippmann denominates them.

groups in a society; the groups who are made to believe that the society that they live in is superior and free. A democracy, in the eyes of those in charge of propaganda, "ought to be a system in which the specialized class is trained to work in the service of the masters, the people who own the society. The rest of the population ought to be deprived of any form of organization, because organization just causes trouble" (22). Similar to surveillance control, propaganda also prevents individuals from forming alliances. Controlled by a major force through the use of deceitful discourses, the way in which the rest of the population thinks, acts and behaves is the result of effective propaganda. In this view, unequivocally, democracy's use of propaganda resembles that of a totalitarian state.

In order to control the masses, in a totalitarian state, the "specialized class" needs "to be deeply indoctrinated in the values and interests of private power and the state-corporate nexus that represents it." The rest of the population, Chomsky continues, "basically just [has] to be distracted" (16). Indoctrination, thus, begins with the "specialized class" and moves to the "bewildered herd," becoming a mechanism of manipulation and control.

The use of slogans to scare people, a common device used in totalitarian states[53] to indoctrinate people, possesses a repetitive quality that creates monotony which translates into habit[54]; as part of this habit, people do not question the content of these messages:

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[53] It is possible to find all these mechanisms of power and control in different kinds of societies. However, since the focus of this work is to analyze totalitarian states in dystopia, I will refer only to the latter.

[54] In George Orwell's *1984*, for instance, citizens are already accustomed to both the *telescreens* and the face of Big Brother, becoming a part of their daily lives.

"You want to create a slogan that nobody's going to be against, and everybody's going to be for. Nobody knows what it means, because it doesn't mean anything. Its crucial value is that it diverts your attention from a question that *does* mean something: Do you support our policy? That's the one you're not allowed to talk about" (Chomsky 22). According to this view, people essentially get habituated to slogans without even trying to understand their meaning—if they even have a meaning. Used as distractors, slogans[55] help condition people to specific behaviors, and their ability to scare citizens creates an even more terrifying view of a totalitarian state:

> You've got to keep them pretty scared, because unless they're properly scared and frightened of all kinds of devils that are going to destroy them from outside or inside or somewhere, they may start to think, which is very dangerous, because they're not competent to think. Therefore it's important to distract them and marginalize them. (23-24)

Through discourses of fear, governments are able to maintain a state of mental laxity among their citizens, which translates into somnolent populations unable to think or react towards the "devils" that their own governments generate. There is no greater catalyst than fear, and totalitarian regimes rely most heavily on it.

[55] *1984* and *V for Vendetta*, both representations of totalitarian states, make use of this kind of slogans to scare and condition citizens as well. In *1984*, the paradoxical slogans "WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" (3) represent the core principles of the Party, and they are displayed as often as Big Brother's face. In the case of *V for Vendetta,* the slogan "STRENGTH THROUGH PURITY. PURITY THROUGH FAITH (11) employs a similar discourse to train its citizens.

The success of propaganda in dystopia lies in its mechanisms of coverage. In order to spread their ideology, totalitarian states need to find ways to convince their representatives that the information they are spreading is accurate and reliable. The most effective propaganda creates certainty in its followers so that they are able to influence others. The state has no interest in treating individuals as individuals but as a collectivity, achieving control in this way.[56] If an individual believes in state propaganda, she/he will help the state by persuading others that the information that circulates among the citizens is in fact trustworthy: people do not need to be afraid of the state; they are here to protect us. Good propaganda, Chomsky argues, makes people support others' policy without questioning it (21).

Religion and Tradition

Besides mass control, surveillance and propaganda, some totalitarian states also make use of religious discourses in order to persuade people to follow certain rules, justifying every action as an act of faith and the word of God. In the eyes of many—particularly those who consider themselves "true" believers—religion is absolute and irrefutable, therefore making it the perfect tool of domination. Most religions instruct people to be devoted followers and to blindly believe in a deity, and, at the same time, they

[56] For instance, Joseph Goebbels, minister of propaganda in Nazi Germany, urged women to stay at home and fulfill their most valuable role: "When we eliminate women from public life, it is not because we want to dispense with them but because we want to give them back their essential honor. . . . The outstanding and highest calling of woman is always that of wife and mother, and it would be unthinkable misfortune if we allowed ourselves to be turned from this point of view" (qtd. in Millett 165).

teach their followers not to question or defy their system of beliefs. One of the major issues in some religions is their discriminatory practices, particularly towards women, for "religion can reinforce existing gendered distributions of power or try to change them" (Woodhead, "Gender" 8). These practices are justified on the basis of tradition, which is simultaneously justified by faith in their scriptures. Using the Bible (or any other sacred text) as their most assertive means of control, religious discourses provide the illusion of certainty to their followers. According to Linda Woodhead, "Religion's constitutive contribution to power relations within society is best understood by viewing religion itself as a system of power" (6). As a functioning system of power, Woodhead continues, "sacred" power interacts with "secular" power, reinforcing or repudiating one another (7).

Religions have been predominately dominated by men. Religious beliefs and practices have for many years favored men, and in their hands, men have placed women in inferior positions.[57] In her book, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative*, Esther Fuchs recognizes how "the biblical narrative . . . legislates and authorizes the political supremacy of men over women" and how "critics [today] choose to ignore the patriarchal ideology that inspires so much of what they glorify" (7). The word of God is, after all, the word of men, for their own benefit, and this has been possible due to the privilege of men being "founded on the absolute and the eternal; they [men] sought to make the fact of their

[57] In the words of seventeenth century feminist Poulain de la Barre: "All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit" (qtd. in de Beauvoir 49).

supremacy into a right" (de la Barre qtd. in de Beauvoir 49). Thus, the supremacy of men[58] is seen not as accidental privilege but as a heavenly right, much stronger and powerful in the eyes of religious followers: "Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. The religions invented by men reflect this wish for domination" (de Beauvoir 49).

As previously stated, some of the discourses that permeate a society are often accepted as true and unchallenged by people due to their basis in tradition—and when one refers to religious discourses, those are usually backed up by thousands of years of tradition. According to Linda Woodhead, "Christianity has traditionally excluded women from positions of power, and often places more emphasis on the connections between divinity and masculinity than divinity and femininity" (*Christianity* 128). Women have traditionally adopted an inferior position, which is supported by a group of passages found in the Bible. Woodhead provides some examples for this. For instance, she states that in the book of Corinthians, "Paul explains that women should be veiled in church to signal their subordination to men because 'the head of every man is Christ, and the head of a woman is her husband,' and that 'women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says'" (129). This example shows two of the major aspects that support women's inferior position. In the first place, women are both "veiled" and silenced, reaching a point in which they practically do

[58] Fuchs adds, "[M]an is a more 'authentic' representative of God because God is male, and God is male because the Bible reflects a masculine construction of the divine" (12).

not exist. Second, the position of women, from a religious perspective, is backed up not only by a hierarchical organization but also by the "law" of God, which, once again from a religious perspective, is irrefutable.

Esther Fuchs argues that "the biblical text reduces women to auxiliary roles, suppresses their voices and minimizes their national and religious significance" (11). In addition, Woodhead affirms, "Theological statements on the position of women from down the centuries testify not only to the assumption that it is men who have the authority to define women, but to the precautions that have been taken to ensure that women do not claim too much *real* equality with men—in this life at least" (*Christianity* 129). The consequences of these "precautions" are evidenced every day since a "hierarchical relation between the sexes is built into the hierarchical scheme that lies at the heart of a Christianity of higher power" (129-31). In other words, men, as the image of God, have the right to rule over women the same way that God rules over men. The clearest example of this in the Bible is the well-known story of Adam and Eve. Kate Millett comments: "This mythic version of the female as the cause of human suffering, knowledge, and sin is still the foundation of sexual attitudes, for it represents the most crucial argument of the patriarchal tradition in the West" (52). Adam, by God's command was meant to rule the earth, the animals, and finally his companion Eve: "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (*King James Bible*, Gen. 3.16). Woodhead comments on the conclusions many critics have reached based on this particular passage. Because of original sin, and the idea that women are morally weaker than men, women's bodies and

women's bodily appetites must be disciplined, and women must focus on values such as "humility, obedience, and chastity" (131).

Gender inequality is evident not just in the Bible but in the organization of religion as an institution as well:

> Christianity benefits men by setting male self-identity on the strongest possible foundation: the image of man is reflected back from God himself. Men also benefit from the way in which the Christian symbolic framework helps the male sex secure a dominant place in society as a whole. It does this not only by legitimating masculine domination, but by de-legitimating female resistance. (Woodhead, *Christianity* 134-35)

Christianity has, for a long time, supported men's supremacy over women, and its practices have constrained women into a role of inferiority and submissiveness.

There is, however, one aspect of women's lives that is highly valued in Christianity: their ability to bear children: "Women with children have much to gain from an institution like the church that supports the family, exalts the domestic role, offers support and companionship in the task of rearing and educating children, and, once children have left home, can find other caring roles for women to perform" (Woodhead, *Christianity* 137). Andrea Dworkin affirms that the Ultra Right encourages women to become mothers at the expense of everything else. She says,

> Women have children because women by definition have children. This "fact of life," which is not subject to qualification, carries with it the instinctual obligation to nurture and protect those children. Therefore, women can be

> expected to be socially, politically, economically, and sexually conservative because the status quo, whatever it is, is safer than change, whatever the change. (13)

Women have to have children because that is their responsibility to society, and this conservative role must not change—unless of course they are instructed otherwise. The Nazis, Dworkin continues, "had a program of breeding," and in 1934, "the Nazis established the Mother Service Department . . . to educate women over eighteen to fulfill their duties of womanhood Nazi-style." Women were not given a choice, Dworkin argues, "Birth control advertisement was forbidden; birth control clinics were shut down; abortions were forbidden and the Nazis were fierce enforcers of antiabortion laws; all so that Aryan women would breed" (148).

The focus on bearing children, undoubtedly the main objective in Gilead in the novel, remains a political issue supported by biblical narratives: "The most detailed biblical narratives about motherhood describe how, against all odds, prospective mothers succeed in giving birth to one or more sons" (Fuchs 44). Jack Zavada describes how Sarah, Abraham's wife; Rebekah, Issac's wive; and Hannah, mother of Samuel the Prophet are some examples of female characters in the Bible who, despite being barren, are granted the possibility of having children. In Gilead, women have children in order to satisfy the government's demands, for the greater good.

Mechanisms of power and control constitute the core elements of totalitarian states to manipulate and control an entire population. People have two "choices": they either follow the regime's doctrines and rules, or else they are considered dissidents, and

this leads to their own deaths in many cases. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, as I will analyze, individuals are constantly under the scrutiny of those in "power."[59] A combination of surveillance, propaganda, and two discourses of power, namely religious and tradition, makes the citizens of the Republic of Gilead prisoners in this totalitarian state both mentally and physically. In this laboratory, individuals are forced to adopt new roles and new identities; they are trained to behave accordingly, and they are isolated from each other, reducing the possibilities of alliance and destroying the hope of ever escaping from the system. The inhabitants of the Republic of Gilead inevitably learn that wherever they go, someone is always watching them, providing a clear example of Foucault's mechanisms of control and power in action.

C. Feminism and Power Relations

> But in the course of this long debate on nature vs. culture, I discovered that, given the present state of science and civilization, *it seems much easier to change natural than cultural facts.*
>
> Evelyne Sullerot, "The Feminine (Matter of) Fact"

Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron define feminism "as an awareness of women's oppression-repression that initiates both analyses of the dimension of this oppression-repression, and strategies for liberation" (x). This simple but at the same time complex definition represents the core of feminist theory. What are the causes (and

[59] Even though a few members of the society hold power, particularly men, it is uncertain who has real power in the novel since at the end, everyone behaves properly because no one is exempt from surveillance.

effects) of the dichotomy oppression-repression? Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott assert that "[w]hereas the concept of repression suggests the holding back of some underlying force, oppression focuses attention on social relations of power and domination" (12). How can women liberate themselves from the oppression of patriarchal constructs? History has demonstrated that violence against women in the hands of men remains an ongoing situation in the world that urgently needs to be eradicated, for a culture of misogyny has placed women at the bottom of the power hierarchical model. In many cultures, women are seen solely as reproductive objects, and it is exactly this function in society that belittles them because many women today have no power or control over their own bodies, particularly over their reproductive choices. Needless to say, once patriarchal societies have absolute control over women's reproductive options, other aspects related to motherhood and the female body are also controlled. The designation of gender roles due to discourses based on tradition, religion and/or fear and the misconceptions these entail are the foundation of gender inequality. Gender inequality in patriarchal structures is based on mechanisms of power and discourses that keep women silent, unnoticed, and in an inferior position in society. Those who are at the top of the hierarchical model, men mostly, use different discourses and mechanisms to control those who are at the bottom.

Powerless Women

Traditionally, patriarchal societies have kept women ignorant[60]; in the words of Kate Millett, "If knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women" (42). Naturally, powerless, ignorant individuals are easy to dominate. Millett asserts, "Serious education for women is perceived, consciously or unconsciously, as a threat to patriarchal marriage, domestic sentiment, and ultimately to male supremacy—economic, social, and psychological" (127). Language has also been a determining factor in the subordination of women. Simone de Beauvoir discusses how the connotation of the word *man* has traditionally reduced women to a state of invisibility:

> In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. . . . A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. (43)

From a traditional point of view, ignorance, lack of education, and the power of language, particularly the connotation of the word *man*, help patriarchal societies to see women as

[60] Regarding women's ignorance, Andrea Dworkin states, "Women experience the world as mystery. Kept ignorant of technology, economics, most of the practical skills required to function autonomously, kept ignorant of the real social and sexual demands made on women, deprived of physical strength, excluded from forums for the development of intellectual acuity and public self-confidence, women are lost and mystified by the savage momentum of an ordinary life" (22).

lesser human beings, a condition that has perpetuated their subordination. On the other hand, education, knowledge, and voice are recognized as dangers for patriarchy, for they all equal power.

Another factor that helps perpetuate women's inferior position is that of the traditional belief that men are superior to women because of "birthright." Millett argues, "Groups who rule by birthright are fast disappearing, yet there remains one ancient and universal scheme for the domination of one birth group by another—the scheme that prevails in the area of sex" (24). This system, Millett claims, where men rule women due to "birthright priority" is "institutionalized" (25) which, in turn, becomes the norm. Once a system is widely accepted as the norm, it often becomes part of tradition and, as such, hardly ever challenged. Birthright, Millett concludes, "tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring" (25). As Dworkin asserts, "The intelligence of women is traditionally starved, isolated, imprisoned" (38). Patriarchy still rules in many societies around the world, and as long as power, undisputed, remains in the hands of men, women will continue being subjugated.

Biological and Cultural Determinism: Family and Motherhood

Following the line of traditions, women's inferior position in society is supported by traditional roles patriarchal societies have imposed on them, such as domestic roles and motherhood. According to Millett, "Sexual politics obtain consent through the 'socialization' of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role,

and status." Many traditional gender roles have biological and cultural reasons as a foundation. Biological reasons limit women's role to "domestic service and attendance upon infants" while "the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition [goes] to the male." Cultural reasons, on the other hand, differentiate masculine and feminine depending on "the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, 'virtue,' and ineffectuality in the female" (26).

Biological and cultural reasons are both used as justification for women's secondary position in society. However, between the two, culture prevails over biology, for culture determines "many of the generally understood distinctions between the sexes in the more significant areas of role and temperament, [as well as] . . . status" (Millett 28). According to Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, after the publication of *The History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault, the ideas that female sexuality is a social construction (9) and that "individual sexualities are profoundly influenced, yet not wholly determined, by the cultures [women] inhabit" (10) were reinforced. Unquestionably, culture represents a stronger influence than biology when determining sexuality and the roles of women and men in society.

Among the many different discourses patriarchies use to dominate women, there is one in particular that places them at the center but prevents them from having any control over it: the family. Traditionally, women's primary role inside the family is to become mothers; their reproductive function is highly valued. Biologically speaking, the majority of women are capable of having children; however, the problem lies in the fact

that many women have no control over the matter. Motherhood, for some women, is not a voluntary decision: "the biological explanation of the so-called conservative nature of women obscures the realities of women's lives" (14).

Unfortunately, "for so long as every female, simply by virtue of her anatomy," says Millett, "is obliged, even *forced*, to be the sole or primary caretaker of childhood, she is prevented from being a free human being" (126; emphasis added). Unlike women, men are free agents and most of the time the head of their households, and they are not usually referred to in terms of fatherhood. This family structure has been used by patriarchal societies to secure women's subordination. As Millett states, "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. . . . Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads" (33). Inside the family structure, even today, women are commonly deprived of their names and possessions in order to adopt their husband's: "The chattel status continues in their loss of name, their obligation to adopt the husband's domicile, and the general legal assumption that marriage involves an exchange of the female's domestic service and (sexual) consortium in return for financial support" (35). The false sense of security women are "granted" in marriage constitutes the core of the traditional family structure.

Female Sexuality and Sexual Violence

Patriarchal societies' major form of control toward women is through their sexuality. As Jackson and Scott argue,

> It is not difficult to see why sexuality should be a major feminist issue. Historically enormous efforts, from chastity belts to property laws, have been made to control female sexuality and to tie women to individual men through monogamous heterosexual relationships. The double standard of morality has entitled men to sexual freedoms denied to women. It has also divided women themselves into two categories: the respectable madonna and the rebarbative whore. Women's sexuality has been policed and regulated in a way which men's has not: it is the woman prostitute who is stigmatised and punished, not her male clients. . . . Women have also been vulnerable to male sexual violence and coercion, yet held responsible for both their own and their assailants' behaviour. (3)

As Jackson and Scott assert, there is a double standard of morality regarding female sexuality. While men may freely enjoy theirs, women cannot, and they are reduced to the dichotomy good or bad, positive or negative. The "respectable madonna" stereotype portrays women positively: pure, decent, and modest. In contrast, the "rebarbative whore" stereotype depicts women negatively: impure, indecent, and immodest, immoral qualities that cannot be accepted in society.[61] In addition to this double standard of morality, women's sexuality is also controlled through violence.

[61] "Feminists [continue] to attack the double standard, to challenge the view that sexuality was bad for women and that only 'bad' women were sexual" (Jackson and Scott 5).

According to Jackson and Scott, "Feminists have seen sexual violence as an enactment of male power" (18). Violence towards women comes in different forms, whether physical or psychological, and two specific forms of violence against women are forced prostitution and rape. There are countless forms of violence towards women, including domestic violence, female genital mutilation, sexual slavery, and human trafficking among others; however, this work will focus on forced prostitution and rape for their relevance in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the novel, both forms are used to control female sexuality. Even though patriarchal structures teach women to repress their sexuality, ironically the same system encourages them to make use of their sexuality to satisfy men's desires. Jackson and Scott affirm, "Within dominant cultural discourses, men are cast as the active initiators of sexual activity and women as passive recipients of male advances; men's desires are seen as uncontrollable urges which women are paradoxically expected both to satisfy and to restrain" (17-18). The long-established difference between male and female sexuality has resulted in a detrimental situation for women.

Prostitution is perhaps one of the most debated issues among feminists, for, along with pornography, it is still considered one of the most important means that objectify women and control female sexuality. Kate Millett asserts that even though women engage in sexual relationships as prostitutes, these sexual encounters are usually quantitative and physiologically passive, for women hardly ever reach an orgasm or take pleasure in them (116-17). Moreover, the author believes that the sexual act is, to some extent, forced rather than voluntary due to economic or psychological needs (117). Jackson and Scott argue that "prostitution is often explained as providing a necessary service," for it

"involve[s] the commodification of sexuality within the marketplace," and "the appropriation of women's bodies . . . through the medium of a cash nexus" (20). Interestingly enough, inside marriages, sex, by tradition, has also been associated with an exchange of interests: "marriage has traditionally given men 'conjugal rights' over their wives' bodies in exchange for maintenance" (20-21). In general, women are expected to satisfy men, whether inside marriage or outside, as prostitutes.

Even though patriarchal societies use prostitution for the benefit of men, the role of the prostitute is still a taboo issue in many societies today for its commonly negative portrayal: "The degradation in which the prostitute is held and holds herself, the punitive attitude society adopts toward her, are but reflections of a culture whose general attitudes toward sexuality are negative and which attaches great penalties to a promiscuity in women it does not think to punish in men" (Millett 123). Jackson and Scott add, "The whore can only figure in male imagination under patriarchal domination, within which women are reduced to their sex" (21). The inconsistency occurs not only in terms of how sexuality is portrayed but in the double denigration women suffer from: even as prostitutes, women are not supposed to enjoy their sexuality, for they are objects at the service of others.

Patriarchies are not usually associated with force, Kate Millett affirms, because their systems have been so perfectly accepted and internalized that violence is not even required (43). However, besides relying on "institutionalized force through their legal systems" (43), patriarchies do rely on physical violence: "Patriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape" (44). In this particular case, Millett argues, "force is restricted to the male who alone is psychologically

and technically equipped to perpetrate physical violence" (44). One of the major problems women face regarding rape is its normalization in society. Andrea Dworkin argues that stories of violence are often "ignored or ridiculed, threatened back into silence or destroyed, and the experience of female suffering is buried in cultural invisibility and contempt" (20). By burying these acts, women and their experiences are denied. Once again, women are objectified, for the subjects, the ones performing the act of raping, are the ones in control.

"Rape Is an Abuse of Power" (Marks and de Courtrivon) lists some of the reasons that justify the act of rape:

> —Men rape because they own (have) the law.
>
> —They rape because they are the law.
>
> —They rape because they make the law.
>
> —They rape because they are the guardians of the peace, of law and order.
>
> —They rape because they have the power, the language, the money, the knowledge, the strength, a penis, a phallus. (194)

Rape is perhaps the most damaging act of violence towards women, for most raped women are forced to live silently with the physical and psychological consequences of the act, and to aggravate matters, in some (if not all) cases, women are meant to believe that they are responsible for the abuse: "that we provoke it / that we are accomplices" (194). As an instance of power, through rape, men demonstrate their physical domination over women. The manifesto ends with a very strong message:

> Rape exists; it's a reality. The raping of silent little girls by fathers, by brothers; the raping of isolated women by men.
>
> in any case it exists in women's minds as fear, as anguish.
>
> it exists in men's minds as a right." (195)

Many feminists agree that there exists a link between pornography and violence, particularly in the form of rape. Benoite Groult, for instance, argues that the sexual revolution brought more stereotypes for women, for they were treated "like potential whores" in the form of eroticism and pornography, reflected not only on film screens but also in literature (68-69). This portrayal of women was not revolutionary, Groult continues, for "they continue to present women as imprisoned and taunted by men" (72). Similarly, Dominique Poggi asserts that in general, pornography is full of "this lamentable redundancy of rapes, all of which, with the exception of a few details, are the same" (76). "As pornography presents them," Poggie writes, "women supposedly love to be forced, humiliated, whipped, and above all, raped" (76). The two authors agree that the representation of women in pornography is detrimental because it places women as objects, never subjects. Poggie goes beyond this representation and affirms that "pornography defends the coercive master-slave relationship that controls the sexual act" (77). For her, "the sex act, as it appears in porn films, *is* a rape, and women who show any resistance, any signs of refusal or suffering, are always presented after the act as pleased, fulfilled, and entirely happy" (77). While the sexual revolution of the 1960s advocated the recovery of women's bodies by women, pornography and the constant depiction of rape "proposes women's bodies be put at the disposal of all men" (78).

Female Objectification and Subjectivity

Once a woman becomes an object, and in most cases a sexual object, she loses her condition of subject. Women become the *other*, for their position depends on the *One,* that is, men: "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought" (44), de Beauvoir reminds us, and to define women as the *other* empowers the *One*. She argues:

> No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. (45)

"The objectification of women is a result of the subjectification of man" (301), Susanne Kappeler[62] reminds us, for the *One*, in this case men, define themselves in terms of power and control. The *other*, women, have to passively "accept" their role as objects. As stated by de Beauvoir, women do not "volunteer to become the object"; their marginalization is imposed by the *One*. In a context like patriarchy, there is no "exchange or communication with that objectified person," Kappeler states, for that objectified person "by definition, cannot take the role of a subject" (301). Subjects and objects in patriarchal structures do not change positions, for it is through the "discourse of culture" that the "patriarchal

[62] Although Susanne Kappeler's article "Subjects, Objects and Equal Opportunities" focuses on the objectification of women in pornography, her analysis covers the basic elements of sexual representation and the ways women are objectified through the "material practice" of looking, as Jackson and Scott call it.

subject constitutes himself" (305). As we have seen before, and in the words of Evelyne Sullerot "*it seems much easier to change natural than cultural facts"* (158).

The way people define or try to define themselves, a highly complex process, is affected by the conditions people live in. Their gender, religion, race, society, politics, and culture, among others, as well as relationships between people, influence the way individuals define themselves and the way they are defined by others. According to Donald Hall, subjectivity is "often used interchangeably with the term 'identity'"; however, subjectivity refers to "social constructs and consciousness of identity" (134). Thus, while a person may define herself/himself in several ways depending on her/his race, class, gender, for instance, subjectivity encompasses all those identities as well as an "awareness of our selves" (134). This awareness is related to a "*responsibility* of creating oneself . . . interrogating and rejecting some roles while trying on and individualizing others" (13).

The formation of subjectivities is never static, for conditions change and new possibilities arise. Donald Hall cites Lawrence W. Friedman who argues that race, gender, and forms of sexuality are choices individuals can make in contemporary societies. Even though Friedman acknowledges that individuals can choose to be or not to be part of a particular group, these choices have limitations, and they are often illusions because of the constraining forces that work on the construction of fixed identities, which are often unknown by individuals (2). Thus, subjectivity constitutes a "tension between choice and illusion, between imposed definitions and individual interrogations of them, and between old formulae and new responsibilities" (2), as Hall asserts.

Moreover, Regenia Gagnier argues that the subject is a subject *to* itself and a subject *to* and *of* others, so the subject becomes "often an 'Other' to others." Gagnier also believes that subjects are subjected to knowledge, particularly "the discourse of social institutions that circumscribe its terms of being" (qtd. in Hall 2-3). Finally, Louis Althusser asserts that the subject is determined by ideology. He defines ideology as "the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group" (158). The function of ideology is to interpellate the individual as a subject (175). For Althusser, free subjectivity is an illusion created by ideology; individuals are made to believe that they are free subjects for making decisions that are actually defined by the ideology (170-71).

In patriarchal societies, women have traditionally been subjected to men, who are the ones in power, and they have become the *Other*, as seen before. British critic and theorist Catherine Belsey claims that "a woman can be 'a subjected being who submits to the authority of the social formation represented in ideology as the Absolute Subject (God, the king, the boss, Man, conscience)'" (qtd. in Hall 99). In addition, Belsey argues that

> [w]omen as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses. Very broadly, we participate both in the liberal-humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition. (qtd. in Hall 100)

These contradictory discourses affect the formation of female identities and hence that of female subjectivities.

It is not surprising, then, as discussed earlier, that societies prefer their individuals normalized, in Foucault's terms. Michel Foucault argues that "human beings are made subjects" through three main modes: the status of sciences (philosophy or economics, for example), the dividing practices (a subject is divided from others: mad vs. sane), and the way a person turns himself/herself into a subject, particularly the case of men who "have learned to recognize themselves as subjects of 'sexuality'" ("Subject and Power" 326-27).

Foucault affirms that there are certain oppositions in society that affect individuals:

> They are struggles that question the status of the individual. On the one hand, they assert the right to be different and underline everything that makes individuals truly individual. On the other hand, they attack everything that separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way. (330)

Foucault further explains that "[a]ll these present struggles revolve around the question: Who are we? They are a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence, which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition that determines who one is" (331).

Belsey and Foucault agree that in order to create true subjectivity, individuals need to resist imposed identities. Foucault asserts that "the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are . . . to liberate us from both the state and from the type of individualization linked to the state" (336). Similarly, Belsey argues that change is possible, for the subject is a *process* (qtd. in Hall 99). As discussed before, subjectivities are

unfixed, and in the case of women in patriarchal societies, they must resist what has been imposed on them, the roles and identities. The most challenging part for women is to recover a chosen subjectivity after being objectified for so long.

In the same line of thought, Judith Butler argues that identities should not be under the constraints of normativity; they need to be defined according to their performativity. Normativity is, for Butler, an instance of "violence," for it stands for "the norms that govern gender" (*Gender Trouble* xx). On the other hand, "[P]erformativity," Butler affirms, "is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (*Gender Trouble* xv). If what constitutes a subject is the performance (and repetition) of acts, the construction of a subjectivity depends highly on those performances, for they construct what an individual is.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood clearly reflects the ideologies of feminism, particularly the conflict between the Feminist Movement and the New Right Movement in the United States in the 1980s. In her novel, Atwood criticizes the dangers of living in a society where women are completely powerless, voiceless and objectified. The novel's focus on the absolute control of human sexuality and human reproduction represent both a warning and a reason to fight for the complete detachment of female sexuality from patriarchal structures. The control patriarchies exercise over female sexuality in all its forms, including prostitution and rape, represents a nightmare for women, who are indoctrinated and forced to accept these norms for survival purposes. According to Kappeler, "The fundamental problem at the root of men's behaviour in the

world, including sexual assault, rape, wife battering, sexual harassment, keeping women in the home and in unequal opportunities and conditions, treating them as objects for conquest and protection—the root problem behind the reality of men's relations with women, is the way men see women, is Seeing" (305). Women will remain objectified by men unless they reclaim their right to speak, choose to exercise their voice, and fight to liberate themselves from patriarchal constraints.

D. Voice, Storytelling and Narrative Techniques

Voice and Speaking

Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman ask a simple but controversial question in regards to the right of speech: "Who can speak?" (xi). To this, one needs to add: Who has the right to speak? And who defines whose right it is to speak? These are questions that have no definite answer, for everyone can speak, but not all *can*. While speech is defined as "the communication or expression of thoughts in spoken words; the power of expressing or communicating thoughts by speaking" ("Speech," def. 1,4), voice "indicate[s] agency and/or identity through autonomous projection of self through expression and/or action" (Meyers and Pacheco 151). The right to speak and exercise one's voice differs immensely depending on people's social, political, religious, economic, cultural, academic background, and situations, to mention a few. In any society, authorized speech, that of the dominant culture, opposes unofficial, illegitimate speech, that of the invisible, marginalized groups of society. Sometimes, minority groups have the "right" to speak out, but their speech is discredited or used in favor of the dominant group. In patriarchal societies, the exercising

of voice is exclusive to men, for they represent the authorized speech. Women, on the other hand, have been traditionally marginalized and their voices have been silenced.

Linda Martín Alcoff argues that to speak for others is always controversial because it is not clear who gives whom the authority to speak for or on behalf of others. In feminism, for instance, the idea of speaking for others has been seen as "arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate" (98). The problem lies in that identities are never homogenous, and to speak for a group is not the same as to speak for each and every single one of the members of a group. Thus, the authority to speak for others, which is often conferred to certain privileged groups in society, is simply inaccurate, for those who should actually speak for themselves do not have the opportunity to do so due to their position. Alcoff affirms that there are two widely accepted positions for this issue: A speaker's location "can serve either to authorize or de-authorize her speech" (98) while "the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for" (99).

The previous argument, Alcoff observes, does not mean that individuals should speak only for themselves, abandoning their social/political responsibility or merely following others' lead uncritically (100). To speak is undeniably a choice, whether the choice is to speak for oneself or for others. Alcott affirms that "[w]hen we sit down to write or stand up to speak, we experience ourselves as making choices." Even when individuals "make conscious choices about their discursive practices free of ideology and the constraints of material reality," it is imperative to "acknowledge the activity of choice and the experience of individual doubt" (101).

Finally, Alcoff asserts that what is said in any speech is as important as the individual who is speaking and the one who is listening, for they help to provide meaning (102). As seen in the previous section, mechanisms of power control and restrain individuals through the use of discourses, and rituals of speaking are not an exception. Alcoff argues that "[r]ituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle" (105). As a political struggle, the act of speech continues to be a powerful tool for both oppression and liberation, for speech can both silence individuals and raise voices.

In fiction, storytelling can have the same effect. Narrators, particularly those in totalitarian states, cannot speak freely, for the society they live in forces them to remain silent. Nevertheless, sometimes these characters speak out, and by telling their story, they resist the system, recover their voices, and challenge authorized speech. In this case, then, positionality, identity, and context—for both the speaker and the listener—strongly affect the meaning of speech.

Stories, Narratives and Storytelling

Reading is never a static process, for the active and changing relationship between stories, storytellers, and readers conveys meaning. According to H. Porter Abbott, for narrative to exist, literary works require "the presence of a story and a story-teller" (4). Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires define stories as "a series of events in a temporal sequence" (1) where the story teller is the one who tells these events. Moreover, narrative,

Abbott affirms, "is a universal tool for knowing as well as telling, for absorbing knowledge as well as expressing it" (10). Combined, these definitions offer the foundation of storytelling as the way to transmit not just a story with events but emotions and meanings.

Besides the universal function of entertainment, the telling of stories has other functions. "All writing in some way or another," Abbott claims, "and often in more ways than one, is a form of action taking place in the world. It is in this regard *performative*. It has functions and effects, and some of these are intended, some are not" (141). Needless to say, a writer's intention, the purpose she/he has in mind when writing a text, will differ in the hands of a reader: the writer creates a story while the reader recreates it. Abbott argues that stories are "always mediated"; in other words, readers, in the case of literature, are the ones who reconstruct the story, and they do so through the narrative discourse (20). The relationship between a narrator and a reader is always dynamic because each side alters the process of creating and recreating a text. There are different narrative techniques that a narrator may use to tell a story and convey meaning, and to know these techniques will facilitate (and complicate) the reading process on the part of the reader.

Framing Narratives

Framing narratives is an example of narrative techniques used by a narrator to tell her/his story. A frame story is a literary device in which a story is embedded into another story, usually the main one. Each narrative has a specific purpose and the secondary narrative usually affects the meaning and effect of the main one. Abbott asserts that "framing narratives can, and often do, play a vital role in the narratives they frame" (29).

There are several classic examples of framing narratives, Abbott comments, such as "Boccacio's *Decameron* (1351-3), Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), and the *Thousand and One Nights* (c. 1450)" (28). The latter example is perhaps the most famous one due to the function each tale serves for the narrator; like Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Scheherazade tells stories to save her life.

The latter type of frames is not the only one, for narration *per se* has frames. Narratives can have external frames such as "textual mediators: publishers, editors, and teachers" (Reid 300). There are also external frames created by readers' assumptions, and internal frames, which the text itself generates. More specifically, Ian Reid classifies frames into four different kinds: "circumtextual, intratextual, intertextual, and extratextual frames" (300). In the first category, circumtextual frames, Reid identifies the materials that border a text such as "physical format, cover and prefatory information, title, opening and closing formulas, authorial ascriptions, and other such circumtextual (or paratextual) markers" (301). The second category, intratextual frames, "operates within the terms of the page" (302). Epilogues and the way they relate to the story are a common example of this category. The third category, intertextual frames, "comprise devices by which a text signals how its very structure of meanings depends on both its similarity to and its difference from certain other texts or text types" (304). The last category, extratextual frames, "include the range of knowledge and expectations that . . . a reader brings to the interpretation of a particular text" (307).

Armine Kotin Mortimer calls these frames *second stories.* In the process of interpreting a text, "the reader is actively solicited to recognize that undercurrent, encoded

in diverse ways, and in so doing to create a second story that is not told outright" (276). According to Mortimer, to accurately recognize second stories, readers need four specific elements: "interest, skill, knowledge, and integrity." The first element, interest, refers to the "particular interaction between text and reader that allows the former to involve the latter." The second element, skill, relates to the reader's ability to interpret clues to convey meaning. The third factor, knowledge, involves "necessary background information the reader must have, a kind of cultural competence that the writer assumes in the reader." Finally, the last factor, integrity, implies the "unity and wholeness, opening and closure" of the second story (293-94). Reader must first be aware of the existence, or the possibility, of second stories in order to fully understand the first story of a narrative. According to Mortimer, second stories may appear before, during, or after the first story, and they may either erupt or remain hidden, leaving only clues behind (276). Second stories are as important as the first story, for they are not secondary stories but a complement, providing, in most cases, closure to the first (277). Similar to Abbott and Reid, Mortimer believes that the narrator provides some clues so the reader can complete that "hidden part of the story" (278).

Frames usually overlap and a reader may find more than one type of framing in a story. In the words of Abbott, "any narrative of any length is studded with embedded micronarratives" (30). According to Reid, "stories become meaningful only within particular acts of reading, and . . . the acts of reading are always—but variously—framed. . . . Unless the intricate processes of framing are brought into critical consciousness, they will cramp and distort interpretation" (299). Readers must be aware of the existence of these frames

in order to enrich their reading experience. If readers are not critically conscious of the existence of these frames, thus overlooking them, they may close the door to meanings of a narrative, since they are unlimited.

First-Person, Autodiegetic Narrator

Narration is possible because we have a narrator, a story, and a reader or listener. This may seem obvious; however, the construction and interpretation of a text differ greatly depending on the kind of narrator, the type of story, and the skills and background a reader has to interpret a text. “Voice in narration is a question of who it is we ‘hear’ doing the narration” (70), Abbott states, and voice is one of the most important literary elements. According to Abbott, “Narrative voice is a major element in the construction of a story. It is therefore crucial to determine the kind of person we have for a narrator because this lets us know just how she injects into the narration her own needs and desires and limitations, and whether we should fully trust the information we are getting” (72). Knowing who narrates a story and analyzing how it is that the narrator tells her/his story influences the way readers approach a literary text and their conclusions as well.

The relevancy of reading a story through the perspective of a first-person narrator presents both advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages of having a first-person narrator is that we get firsthand knowledge about the narrator’s feelings, thoughts, impressions and the like. First-person narrators are not always the protagonists of their stories; however, when a character in the story narrates her/his own story, and in some cases, as in *The Handmaid’s Tale,* that character is the protagonist, the story becomes more

personal and we may identify with the narrator and try to understand her/his reasons for being and acting in a certain way.

Issues of reliability have often been a major obstacle in first-person narration. Several critics have argued about the dangers of having autodiegetic narrators[63] that speak for others as well as for themselves. In the words of Abbott, "To what extent can we rely on the narrator to give us an accurate rendering of the facts? To what extent, once we have ascertained the facts, are we meant to respect the narrator's opinions when she offers an interpretation?" (75-76). Narrator reliability has long been debated among literary critics, for first-person narrators do not necessarily know what happens outside their scope of narration, they may change the events of the story, or they may decide to leave certain parts out for different reasons. As Abbott argues, "if there is a narrator, almost invariably the reliability of the narrator becomes a focus of dispute" (68). However, to have an "unreliable" narrator has its own advantages. According to Abbott, "One important advantage in such narratives is that narration itself—its difficulties, its liability to be subverted by one's own interests and prejudices and blindness—becomes part of the subject." As readers, one may be able to understand and develop a clear judgment of a character even though the narrative comes from an "unreliable" narrator (76). Abbott concludes that there are many types of unreliable narrators; some can be trusted for the facts but not for interpretations while others cannot even be trusted for the facts (77). "First-person narration," Abbott recognizes, "almost invariably includes third-person

[63] Autodiegetic narration refers to a "first-person or homodiegetic narration in which the narrator is also the main character in the storyworld" (Herman 182).

narration." The actions of other characters are known or witnessed by the first-person narrator. If one finds a narrative in the third person, Abbott claims, the narration is usually done by "a narrator situated outside of the world of the story [who] does not invite us to look at him or her (or it) as a character" (71). Even though first-person narratives may include third-person narration, the emphasis is still placed on the first-person narrator who is the one who knows, controls and can change the story at any point.

Recalcitrance

Austin M. Wright introduces the term "formal recalcitrance" to refer to the resisting forces between shaping forms and shaped materials in stories (115). "Formal recalcitrance," Wright argues, "makes formal unity more flexible [so that] it can bring together into a single scheme certain interests valued by formal critics and other interests, seemingly incompatible, valued by antiformalists." Resistance or formal recalcitrance occurs during "the author's creating process and the reader's recreating one." When one reads, Wright affirms, "[o]ur illusion of understanding a novel is essentially a perception of a form." However, that form is never a "fully realized entity," so readers should focus on the process, rather than the form *per se*, and to look for and understand "whatever slows down or interferes with this process" (116). Once readers accept this view, Wright states, the literary text "is no longer an immutable object which we do or do not understand but an active entity in a process or change (that is, our understanding is changing)" (117). Such resistance, to language, conventions, the fictional world, characters, and length, among others, makes our perception of the form incomplete and not definitive (118). The

"contemporary reader," Mary Rohrberger and Dan Burns suggest, "is required to participate in a kinship relationship with the author" (qtd. in Wright 119).

One specific example Wright refers to in his article is the open-ended story. This kind of story is recalcitrant in its "rejection of conventional beginnings and ends" (119). Wright affirms that "[t]he normal effect of an ending is to reduce recalcitrance, as in most novels and much traditional short fiction." However, when a story does not reach an end, the reading effect changes. Final recalcitrance, for instance, refers to texts whose ending requires the reader to look back and reconsider after the reading is done in order to satisfy the expectation of wholeness (121). Wright distinguishes five varieties of final recalcitrance: mimetic resistance (unresolved contradiction), unexplained explanations (the reader must draw her/his own conclusions), unexplained juxtaposition (no rational explanation), symbolic recalcitrance (unexplained symbolic schemes), and moral discontinuity (contradiction in the fictional mode) (124-27).

Gaps and Closure

Another narrative technique commonly found in literature is gaps. H. Potter Abbott argues that "narratives by their nature are riddled with gaps." Like riddles, readers need to decipher and construct the meaning of narratives and resolve the puzzling questions that a text presents. Gaps are usually filled in with the help of the text itself: "The narrative discourse," Abbott asserts, "gives us some guidance for filling in these gaps" (90). However, the text is not the only source for filling in gaps. Readers also make inferences based on, for instance, their own background.

The filling in of gaps may “often lead to overreading,” Abbott warns us; however, “it also gives the experience of narrative much of its power” (91). As mentioned before, for a narrative to convey meaning, it is imperative that the relationship between narrators and readers be an active one, and to fill in gaps is one of the most basic but complex processes a reader must undergo. Some gaps, however, may remain “wide open” (91) which is also highly effective in terms of effects. Abbott affirms that not all gaps need to be filled in because sometimes by “leaving out, by suggesting and not specifying,” a desired effect on readers is reached: readers *feel* rather than just *see*. “In the art of narrative, less can be more,” Abbott concludes (92).

One common gap readers are sometimes faced with is that of an open-ended story. An ending refers to how a narrative ends, the last words a reader encounters, while closure involves the resolution of conflict(s), “expectations and uncertainties that arise during the course of a narrative” (Abbott 57). Some narratives may have an ending without necessarily reaching closure. According to Abbott, “the most difficult thing about reading narratives is to remain in a state of uncertainty. If a narrative won’t close by itself, one often tries to close it” (89). However, this may lead to problems such as underreading, “[to] overlook things that are there,” or overreading, “[to] put things that are not there” (86). When an ending fails to answer all those questions that are raised during the reading of a narrative and it actually “opens them up even wider,” some readers may feel frustrated. Nevertheless, “this openness is not necessary a bad thing,” for narratives “don’t tell us what to think but cause us to think” (63).

The relationship that exists between readers and narratives is complex, for several factors change the dynamics of that relationship. Framing narratives and second stories, narrators and issues of reliability, resisting forces inside the narrative in addition to gaps, endings and closures are just a few of the numerous techniques found in narratives that help convey meaning. These narrative techniques help readers construct meaning and understand the different functions of a narrative. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a powerful story with a powerful female storyteller. I will later analyze how Offred's narrative has a major function beyond the mere telling of a story. In the following chapters, I will analyze Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The study will comprise a feminist-dystopian analysis concerning issues regarding mechanisms of power in dystopia, gender inequality and female sexuality, and the power of voice.

CHAPTER III:
MECHANISMS OF POWER AND CONTROL IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

"BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU": Surveillance in Dystopia

> The Eyes of God run over all the earth.
>
> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*
>
> On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. **BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU**, the caption beneath it ran.
>
> George Orwell, *1984*

Big Brother, the enigmatic yet almighty being who controls and guards the city of Oceania in George Orwell's novel *1984*, symbolizes the ultimate mechanism of power in dystopia.[64] "Big Brother Is Watching You," the ingenious propaganda slogan used in the novel to frighten Oceania's inhabitants and guarantee their loyalty to the government, contains in itself the core of this mechanism: no matter where you are, whether a public or private space, someone somewhere is *always* watching you. Surveillance in dystopia allows the hypothetical observer to have absolute control over the observed since this apparatus of control goes beyond simple observation: those being observed are unable to know

[64] The similarities between *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* have been made clear on several occasions by Margaret Atwood herself. Orwell's novel was one of the major sources of inspiration for Atwood when writing her female dystopia. She states, "*Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written not as science fiction but as an extrapolation of life in 1948. So, too, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is a slight twist on the society we have now" ("Reader's Companion").

exactly when—if ever—they are being observed, turning this practice into a psychological game. Because of the uncertainty of not knowing when or by whom one is observed, no one can or should be trusted in dystopia, not even ourselves.

In Orwell's novel *1984*, for instance, all Oceania's inhabitants are familiar with the figure of Big Brother; each individual knows what he looks like and his position in society, even though they have never seen him in person. Big Brother's face, which is posted on almost every single wall around the city, is enough proof for them to accept his legitimacy—that, and the fact that no one is allowed to question his authenticity. This god-like being—because authoritative figures are almost always male—is used as a paternal face which must be respected, worshiped but most of all feared. In the end, it all comes down to one question: Is Big Brother real? The answer might be negative and to our surprise, trivial and beside the point. In this specific context, a dystopian society that portrays a totalitarian state, Big Brother's existence is irrelevant. In order to exercise complete control over its citizens, the real observers are those institutions in charge of operating on behalf of this "face," mere mortals who out of belief—or fear—work for the major cause: the common good. When it comes to patriarchal societies, these institutions are, as expected, run by men, and women, predictably, are the most affected since they do not exercise any kind of control or power and are always under constant surveillance. This is beyond a doubt the case of *The Handmaid's Tale.*

In the Republic of Gilead, Big Brother is not watching you; no one is supposed to worship or fear a god-like figure posted on a wall. There are no *telescreens* following one's every move and telling one what to do. No, in the Republic of Gilead there is no Big Brother.

Nevertheless, there are eyes everywhere. Offred, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, accurately presents a detailed account of the ideological mechanisms of power in Gilead throughout the narration of *herstory*. *The Handmaid's Tale*, like other dystopias, describes a totalitarian state whose inhabitants, particularly women, are under constant surveillance and where both institutions and individuals exercise extensive surveillance—consciously or unconsciously. As previously stated, Michel Foucault considers this constant surveillance a disciplinary mechanism; in his words, "the major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). The uncertainty of not knowing when one is being observed creates a behavior of self-imposed observation which leads the observed to become her/his own observer. Power is now executed by those who desire to control others without even taking part in the game, and those who are under control are inevitably trapped in it. In one way or another, all the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* become part of the vigilant system, exemplifying and exposing Foucault's Panopticism as a disciplinary mechanism.

Surveillance Inside the Rachel and Leah Center

The Rachel and Leah Center (commonly known as the Red Center), an indoctrination center Offred introduces in the first chapter of the novel, stands for Bentham's Panopticon, and, ultimately, Foucault's concept of panopticism. The Red Center is the physical structure where the government keeps women captive and under permanent vigilance until their reeducation process finishes. Their freedom to choose over

their own lives has been removed, and they are secluded from the rest of the society. Inside the center, women are not allowed to speak to each other, and they are constantly under the scrutiny of others. Ideologically, inside the Red Center, women have fallen into a psychological and physical game of power and control: they are deprived of any kind of power, and they are classified according to the function that they will now serve for their society. When the process of indoctrination starts, women are dispossessed of their own identity and voice in order to adopt new ones. For this to be accomplished, they become a group,[65] they must follow specific rules, and they cannot under any circumstance question the system. Unless instructed to, women are not permitted to leave the center, and there is a clear gender separation inside the center: women and men are not to be together alone. In the Red Center, women become other people's laboratory rats in what Foucault calls the "laboratory of power" (204), "a way of defining power relations in terms of everyday life" (205).

Inside the center, there are two groups of women: the Handmaids and the Aunts. The Handmaids are the group of women who best epitomizes Foucault's disciplinary mechanism. This particular group of women, indoctrinated in this center in order to become vessels for human reproduction, is meant to believe that the future of humankind is in their hands—or in their uteruses, more precisely: "Aunt Lydia said she was lobbying for the front. Yours is a position of honor, she said" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 13).[66]

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[65] These women become part of a voiceless group, one that should not be mistaken for an alliance.

[66] All subsequent quotations from the novel will be followed parenthetically by the page number in this edition (1986).

The nature of their service is "highly valued," or so they are meant to believe. They have to adopt the role of a handmaid, which means that every two to three years they have to move to a different household with the purpose of becoming pregnant and "preserving the human race." As part of the indoctrination process, they learn not to question the system, becoming "faithful"[67] followers of it. There are those who become true believers of the system and would do anything in their power to fulfill their new role in society. Others, however, are trapped in a system which they realize destroys their humanity. Janine and Moira, both Handmaids, are examples of this dichotomy. Janine is a "true believer." Completely brainwashed at the center, she becomes Aunt Lydia's pet: "You are a reliable girl, she went on, not like some of the others" (129). Moira, on the other hand, refuses to accept her role and tries to escape from the center several times. Aunt Lydia trusts Janine with the story of Moira's escape, and Offred understands where that behavior comes from: "But by that time Janine was like a puppy that's been kicked too often, by too many people, at random: she'd roll over for anyone, she'd tell anything, just for a moment of approbation" (129). Even though Janine is seen as a "true believer" of the system, Offred exposes the real reasons for her behavior: women in the center have no choice but to accept their new reality if they want to survive. Once Offred is outside the center, she learns to be exceptionally careful with those who truly believe in the system, especially because most of the time she is unable to differentiate true believers from dissidents: "She [Ofglen]

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[67] "Faithful" followers is used sarcastically here because not all individuals accept their role out of faith but solely as a survival mechanism.

may be a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name. I can't take the risk" (19). Unfortunately, for Offred, inside and outside the center, most Handmaids are Janines.

Finally, as part of their disciplinary mechanism, Handmaids become nameless in the Red Center: none of them is allowed to use her name anymore, and even when they try to hang onto their real names, men's names will soon replace them. At the beginning of the novel, Offred narrates how even though women learn not to speak, they learn how to whisper, and one of the first things that they exchange is their own name: "We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (4). This is the only reference to the characters' real names in the entire novel. For instance, we never learn the protagonist's real name; we learn, however, that her new name Offred reflects her new state: she is now the possession *Of* a man named *Fred*. By eliminating the most obvious part of their identities, their name, women become less than human beings: they become objects with a specific purpose. Whether they are useful or not depends on how successful they are in fulfilling their role. Additionally, each woman's identity and name disappears inside the collectivity of the Handmaids, not in order to distinguish one from another, but so as to turn them against each other in order to have complete control over them. Inside the center, they are in essence observed, isolated, and fundamentally indoctrinated with the new rules of the Republic of Gilead.

The Aunts, the female group in charge of educating these women, are the reliable watchers who "patrol" these women, carrying their "electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts" (4). The Aunts are the ones who are present at all times in the

Handmaids' lives before they are sent to their corresponding households. Unable to bear children themselves, they encourage other women to save humanity by becoming faithful (fearful?) believers of the system. Their relationship seems to be one of control; they seem to be in a higher position of power inside the Center; however, soon we learn that the Aunts are simply powerless puppets manipulated by a higher and larger group: "No guns though, even they [the Aunts] could not be trusted with guns. Guns were for the guards, specially picked from the Angels" (4). Like the Handmaids, the Aunts become prisoners of the system, and they end up accepting the teachings they are meant to inculcate as true: "Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or" (8). As critic Heather Latimer asserts, "The reverse logic of what type of freedom the handmaids are now offered plays a large role in Offred's story, as the novel plays with the words choice, freedom and privacy. For instance, Aunt Lydia constantly tells the handmaids they are lucky that they are protected by the state." Clearly, the Aunts become blind of their own reality, believing their position privileged and accepting their situation without questioning it.

Surveillance Outside the Rachel and Leah Center

The Guardians of the Faith, the first group of men described in the novel, are the soldiers that exclusively patrol women, particularly once their two-to three-year post starts at one of the Commanders of the Faithful's households. The Guardians carry guns—unlike women whose only weapons are electric cattle prods, carried by the Aunts in the Red Center—, and they patrol women everywhere; their job is to make sure that the Handmaids

do not escape their sexual and reproductive roles. In order for the guardians to avoid any social contact with any woman, the Guardians cannot be alone with the Handmaids: "The guards weren't allowed inside the building except when called. . ." (4). Unlike the Eyes, a superior group of men whose identity is secret, every citizen in Gilead sees and knows who the Guardians are. In her daily walks, Offred and her companion, another Handmaid, encounter the Guardians every time that they cross a blockade:

> Behind the barrier, waiting for us at the narrow gateway, there are two men, in the green uniforms of the Guardians of the Faith, with the crests on their shoulders and berets: two swords, crossed, above a white triangle. The Guardians aren't real soldiers. They're used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden, for instance, and they're either stupid or older or disabled or very young, apart from the ones that are Eyes incognito. (20)

Offred emphasizes the Guardians' "menial functions" and the fact that they are also mere instruments of the totalitarian state. They serve a specific function in society, and like the rest of the groups, the Guardians supervise women as a survival mechanism.

The Eyes, the most powerful male group in the novel, are responsible for insuring obedience to Gilead's laws. Unlike George Orwell's Big Brother, the Eyes do not have a common face; they are unknown to the average citizen. However, they may be identified—if they wished to be identified—due to their symbol, a winged eye: "Or sometimes a black-painted van, with the winged Eye in white on the side. The windows of the vans are dark-tinted, and the men in the front seats wear dark glasses: a double obscurity" (21-22). The

men's identity inside these vans is uncertain, which causes anxiety and horror among the rest of the citizens, as they represent that god-like being who is to be respected, worshipped and feared at all times:

> The vans are surely more silent than the other cars. When they pass, we avert our eyes. If there are sounds coming from inside, we try not to hear them. Nobody's heart is perfect.
>
> When the black vans reach a checkpoint, they're waved through without a pause. The Guardians would not want to take the risk of looking inside, searching, doubting their authority. Whatever they think. (22)

The Eyes are everywhere, and they are able to see and hear everything; they are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Their role is to protect the state and to capture and destroy those who oppose the totalitarian regime. Offred knows this, which makes her uncomfortable when surrounded by people: "What they [Japanese tourists] must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth. Not the eyes. I know better than to look the interpreter in the face. Most of the interpreters are Eyes, or so it's said" (28). Offred is afraid of being caught by one of the Eyes and turned into an Unwoman, and this fear makes her behave according to what is expected from her: she must be submissive and silent, part of the puppet show. Offred, a panopticon prisoner, knows how to behave in order not to get caught by one of the Eyes, and, at the same time, she behaves properly because she is terrified by the idea of being caught. In another scene, Offred tells us about how the Eyes capture an unknown man and her own failure to look away:

> But I can't help seeing. Right in front of us the van pulls up. Two Eyes, in gray suits, leap from the opening double doors at the back. They grab a man who is walking along, a man with a briefcase, an ordinary-looking man, slam him back against the black side of the van. He's there a moment, splayed out against the metal as if stuck to it; then one of the Eyes moves in on him, does something sharp and brutal that doubles him over, into a limp cloth bundle. They pick him up and heave him into the back of the van like a sack of mail. Then they are also inside and the doors are closed and the van moves on.
>
> It's over, in seconds, and the traffic on the street resumes as if nothing has happened.
>
> What I feel is relief. It wasn't me. (169-70)

The amount of violence that the Eyes are willing to use is clear in this scene, and the reasons why they capture this unknown man are never revealed—not that they are relevant. Offred, and the others who are able to observe, are being introduced to the consequences of disobedience. Knowledge is power, which is exactly what the inhabitants of Gilead lack. She is relieved that it was not she; Offred knows how to play the game. She understands why they are being watched: in their uniforms, walking in the streets, they must look "picturesque," Offred remarks, and "[s]oothing to the eye, the eyes, the Eyes, for that's who this show is for" (212). As part of a disciplinary system, the Eyes accomplish their most important objective. Offred, the ultimate panopticon prisoner, is terrified and relieved simultaneously, and this feeling is what makes her the ultimate dystopian prisoner:

completely afraid of the Eyes, isolated and unable to trust anyone, she learns how to monitor herself, obey Gilead's rules, and avoid punishment.[68]

In a dystopia, particularly one that portrays a totalitarian state, everyone gets caught in the psychological game that derives from being observed and controlled by a major force. While the Aunts control the Handmaids, the Guardians control the former group, and the Eyes and the Angels (more powerful male groups)[69] simultaneously control the Guardians. In this female dystopia, Atwood clearly depicts the power hierarchy: those at the bottom of the hierarchical model are women and those at the top men. In the novel, the prospective Handmaids cannot go outside, speak to each other or even touch each other because once outside the Center, they must fulfill the one and only objective they were born to fulfill, and this does not require any kind of freedom, voice, or even human contact. The Handmaids learn the most valuable lesson for survival inside the Rachel and Leah Center: their new identity and role will save them from the Colonies and a death sentence. Similarly, the Aunts become prisoners once they adopt their role as supervisors since they cannot leave their posts, and even when they think they have some kind of power, a major force conformed by men trains them to believe so. In general, these groups of men, about which Atwood does not go in depth but rather leaves mostly to the readers' imagination, school women like little girls to obey Gilead's rules. They learn to behave

[68] Later, nevertheless, I will analyze how Offred's own mechanisms are the key to her survival.

[69] I will not discuss the last category, the Angels, in this work for two reasons. First, their function in this society is outside the walls of the Republic of Gilead: they fight to protect the city. Second, the amount of information regarding them is very limited.

suitably to fit the standards of their society; and finally, they are isolated, unable to form part of a collectivity that eventually may result in an act of alliance and rebellion. In short, they are all trapped, and the dream of escaping from this system, annihilated little by little. As a disciplinary mechanism, the Red Center corrects previous behaviors—those of "the time before"—and trains women to support the regime by becoming faithful followers and vessels for the benefit of their society. Nonetheless, as we will analyze later, Offred's narrative clearly shows us that even the most perfect system has its flaws.

Joseph Goebbels' Legacy: Propaganda in Dystopia and the Means to (Pre)Serve Humanity

> In what is nowadays called a totalitarian state, or a military state, it's easy. You just hold a bludgeon over their heads, and if they get out of line you smash them over the head. But as society has become more free and democratic, you lose that capacity. Therefore you have to turn to the techniques of propaganda. The logic is clear. Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state.
>
> Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*
>
> Mr. John Langdon Davies warns women 'that when children cease to be altogether desirable, women cease to be altogether necessary'. I hope you will make a note of it.
>
> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

As mentioned before, political interests, among others, have led entire populations to accept the demands of their governments and engage into war if its single or most

important reason is to "save the world." In the same way, the foundation of the Republic of Gilead heavily relies on the "saving the world" slogan. Even though the inhabitants of Gilead do not understand or know much about what is going on beyond the boundaries of their territory (prison?), they earnestly believe that the Angels and other groups of soldiers are fighting a war in order to protect them. Atwood does not devote a great deal of time to the war issue in her novel. As readers, the amount of information regarding the reasons, progress, victories and/or defeats of the war outside Gilead is scarce. However, the notion of war is present in Offred's and the rest of the Handmaids' daily lives since they are well-trained to appreciate what their guardians have accomplished for them:

> "The war is going well, I hear," she [Ofglen] says.
>
> "Praise be," I reply.
>
> "We've been sent good weather."
>
> "Which I receive with joy."
>
> "They've defeated more of the rebels, since yesterday."
>
> "Praise be," I say. I don't ask her how she knows, "What were they?"
>
> "Baptists. They had a stronghold in the Blue Hills. They smoked them out."
>
> "Praise be." (19-20)

The war outside Gilead has an obvious religious connotation; they are fighting a war against religions, not countries. Learning about the victories and the defeats of the religious rebels helps the government control its citizens. The Handmaids are glad and grateful that "the war is going well," and they "praise" the lord for their victories. This false sense of security is what holds Gilead together. This type of propaganda, "state propaganda" in Chomsky's

words, equals complete manipulation over a distressed population, and since it is an extremely rigid system usually supported by an elite class, the population is at the mercy of the unknown. Male groups in the novel clearly represent Chomsky "specialized class," who is in charge of teaching the "spectators" how to behave. These powerless groups, represented in the novel primarily by women, learn (are brainwashed) to blindly accept the teachings of those "superior" groups.

In a totalitarian state such as the one portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*, this mechanism of manipulation and control uses three particular discourses: fear, religion, and tradition. And this kind of terrorizing propaganda aims specifically at women, who become the ones solely responsible for the salvation of humanity. In the novel, for instance, Handmaids are targets of both direct and indirect threats. As a direct, explicit threat, if the Handmaids fail to fulfill their purpose after a few attempts, they will be declared Unwomen and sent to the Colonies. As an indirect threat, if the Handmaids fail to bear children, they will cause the end of civilization. But what is more disturbing is the fact that they are dangerously convinced of having the tools to save humanity. The slogan "Gilead is within you" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 23) is probably the most direct example of this. Handmaids learn in the Center that the future of the Republic of Gilead is in their hands and that the tool to save humanity is to procreate. As previously mentioned, to fail in this "simple" task implies becoming an Unwoman and being sent to the Colonies. The fear of causing greater damage to humanity makes these women "make" the decision of adopting the role of Handmaids. The choice is there, according to the Aunts,

> Nobody asking you, Cora said. Anyways, what could you do, supposing?

> Go to the Colonies, Rita said. They have the choice.
>
> With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all? said Cora. (10)

Rita, a Martha,[70] disapproves of the Handmaids' "choice." For her, they could have chosen the Colonies instead. In Cora's view, Rita evidently ignores the conditions and terrible consequences women face in the Colonies. Indeed, most citizens in Gilead are unaware of what really happens in the Colonies. Ignorance is bliss, some people say, and in this case, ignorance is what keeps Gilead's citizens alive. The fact that they do not know the reality of the Colonies scares them even more. Once again, Atwood does not provide a lot of details regarding this place. We do know that those who are unwanted or that interfere with the Republic of Gilead's plan are sent there to die.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the use of propaganda is extremely effective, and the means by which people are indoctrinated are exceptionally persuasive. Propaganda in Gilead sells the idea that the "common interests"[71] are superior to any other interest that an individual may have. The "common interests" seem to be those of the population, for their own benefit; however, it is clear that in a totalitarian regime the "common interests" are those that directly benefit the major forces, helping them sustain their reign of terror. This is the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which women learn that their function in society is for the

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[70] All women are classified according to the function they have in Gilead. I will refer to this and other groups of women in the following chapter.

[71] "The common interests are those of "us," the businessman, the worker, the housewife. That's all 'us'" (Chomsky 20).

benefit of all: the common good. All efforts combined—women are made to believe—will bring a better future. In the Republic of Gilead, women are no longer free to decide over their own lives, least of all their own bodies. Every one of their decisions is made by someone else, and they sacrifice themselves by renouncing their identities and adopting new ones. In this totalitarian society, each new identity depends on the function women now serve their nation, which is supported by an extreme indoctrination system.

In the Republic of Gilead, fertile women, Handmaids, become instruments of the state. Under the influence of state discourses, they understand the importance of fulfilling their unique role in society: bearing children. Their indoctrination process starts in the Rachel and Leah Center, commonly known as the Red Center due to the color of the Handmaid's habits. As previously discussed, the Red Center functions as a prison in which women are constantly under surveillance and at the same time strongly "advised" to reach their only goal in society. In simple words, they are programmed, brainwashed. The Aunts' role is to re-educate these women. Since the Aunts are older women who are not able to bear children, their role is to instruct younger women about the necessity of becoming "mothers."[72] There are numerous mechanisms of propaganda that the Aunts use to encourage these younger women: by means of speeches, testimonies and films, the Aunts instill the Handmaids to accept their role and to praise whatever comes with it.

[72] Mother is rather an ambiguous term in the novel since women who give birth are not allowed to keep their babies. Even when they become biological mothers, they cannot execute that role.

Propaganda Inside the Rachel and Leah Center

The first mechanism to educate younger women is "the Aunt said" technique[73]: speeches that teach women how to act and think under any circumstance. Throughout the novel, we can see the effectiveness of this practice, given that the Handmaids—including Offred—strictly follow these teachings and seem to be fond of them. On the surface, all Handmaids resemble a robot army: they all act according to how others program them. Handmaids are publicly seen on the streets when they go in pairs to do their daily shopping or on very special occasions in which they are summoned to be part of a ritual. On these occasions, they all act the same, greet people the same way and even walk at the same pace. Beyond appearances, all Handmaids think and respond to their environment homogeneously because every speech the Aunts give helps them cope with that environment. Offred, for instance, recalls every speech the Aunts gave in the Red Center, and specific lessons learned there help her survive in the Republic of Gilead.

Everything that the Handmaids need to learn in the center comes from the teachings of these older women. Handmaids first learn to devoutly accept their role: "She [Aunt Lydia] said, Think of yourselves as seeds, and right then her voice was wheedling, conspiratorial, like the voices of those women who used to teach ballet classes to children, and who would say, Arms up in the air now; let's pretend we're trees" (18-19). Two major

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[73] "Simon says," a popular children's game, consists of one person telling others what to do; those who fail are *eliminated*, but the one who is able to meticulously follow all the instructions is named the *winner* and is praised by other players. In the same way, women are told what to do in the Red Center; those who succeed will be praised, but those who refuse to follow the teachings and rebel against them will become Unwomen, nonexistent individuals.

features mark the tone of all the speeches the Aunts give in order to convince women to become “seeds,” a woman’s ultimate goal in this new dystopian society. The first one, the “wheedling, conspiratorial” voice, craftily persuades women while getting them entangled in a deceitful, dangerous system. The second one, the comparison between the Aunts and the ballet teachers, treats women like little girls who need to be re-educated into objects, rooted, unable to move.

In the past, the Aunts lecture, “We were a society dying . . . of too much choice” (25). For the Aunts, choice is the reason for their adverse fate; choice led women to make decisions that affected the values of marriage and childbearing, making them reject their most vital roles. By accepting their role, women in the center end up believing that they have finally reached freedom: “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (24). The first type of freedom, “freedom to,” connotes true freedom, the one the Aunts desperately want the Handmaids to avoid: freedom to choose. Instead, they urge these women to have “freedom from,” letting more suitable people make decisions for them. Strictly speaking, “freedom from” actually means slavery: women are prisoners in the Center until they become completely indoctrinated, and once they are out of the center, they become sexual slaves. According to the Aunts, in Gilead women are privileged because their freedom is an aspect in their lives they do not have to fight for.

Furthermore, “freedom from” gives women the advantage of focusing on being modest and invisible: “Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen—

to be *seen*—is to be—her voice trembled—penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. She called us girls" (28). Handmaids must be invisible, submissive and innocent creatures. These childlike characteristics make it easier for others to control their lives because as children, they learn that they must obey and respect their elders without questioning their authority. There is a clear contradiction in this statement: women are not supposed to be "seen" by others, but they are constantly being watched. The Aunts encourage these women not to be seen, among other things, as sexual beings, even though their role requires having intercourse once a month with a person they barely know. As part of this invisibility, Handmaids also need to avoid contact with other people, particularly men:

> Nick looks up and begins to whistle. Then he says, "Nice walk?" I nod, but do not answer with my voice. He isn't supposed to speak to me. Of course some of them will try, said Aunt Lydia. All flesh is weak. . . . They can't help it, she said, God made them that way but He did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set the boundaries. Later you will be thanked. (45)

The risk of being in contact with other people lies in the possibility of, among other things, association and rebellion. The Aunts know this and so they deceive Handmaids by teaching them that contact is severely forbidden and that to avoid it is highly valued. In addition, women have to be sexless unless they can bear children for the benefit of all, so they are not allowed to interact with other men. The Aunts like to point out that God created

women and men differently and that this "fact" justifies men's way of acting. Handmaids, according to the Aunts, need to understand but mostly accept this way of acting.

In order to accomplish their role, Handmaids also need to understand how "defeated women" feel:

> It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them. Aunt Lydia thought she was very good at feeling for other people. Try to pity them. . . . You must realize that they are defeated women. They have been unable— (46)

The Aunts force the Handmaids to understand the Wives' position in all of this. They have to "feel for them" and "pity them" because these women represent failure, for they are not able to bear children themselves. They were not able to fulfill their utmost role: procreate.[74] The Handmaids, on the other hand, are fertile and have to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of all. Otherwise, they implicitly learn, they will also become "defeated women," women whose value diminishes in this society.

The Aunts constantly remind the Handmaids the importance of their role in the Republic of Gilead: they are the solely responsible for the future of humanity. Aunt Lydia states,

[74] As opposed to the Handmaids and other women that belong to lower social classes, the Wives will almost never be named Unwomen since their role in Gilead is not to bear children but to bring them up.

> The *future* is in your hands, she resumed. She held her own hands out to us, the ancient gesture that was both an offering and an invitation, to come forward, into an embrace, an acceptance. In your hands, she said, looking down at her own hands as if they had given her the idea. But there was nothing in them. They were empty. It was our hands that were supposed to be full, of the *future*; which could be held but not seen. (47; emphasis added)

The possibility of a future for humanity, which becomes the Handmaids' burden, represents the last and most important lesson they learn in the center. The Handmaids "compellingly accept" their denigrated position in this society, for if they fail to fulfill this role, the future of humanity will be hopeless.[75] They have to blindly believe in it—they learn to do so—even when the present is dreadful for them:[76] the Handmaid's own future and happiness is not relevant when the future of many is at stake—or so they have to accept.

The second mechanism that the Aunts use to instruct women in the center is testimonies. Testimonies help the Aunts create a collective environment full of pity and sorrow. Women experience through others the negative consequences of "licentiousness" and "free will" from the *time before*.[77] During Testifying, a ritual held at the Red Center in

[75] Of course, one cannot overlook the fact that the direct threat of the Colonies is their major motivation to become Handmaids. These women do not have a real choice to make. The system practically forces them to adopt their new role.

[76] One cannot forget that—disguised as consensual sex—the Commanders rape the Handmaids every month in a ritual whose purpose is to procreate. I will discuss this act in detail later in this work.

[77] In the novel, the time before refers to the period before the establishment of the Republic of Gilead. Needless to say, at that time women had rights, freedom, and voice.

which women confess their "sins," the Aunts force the Handmaids to tell their tragic stories from the *time before*. Testifying relies on convincing other women that their past, full of terrors, is not going to repeat itself in this new society. Like a manipulated puppet, Janine becomes the Aunts' favorite testifier. The Aunts use her testimonies, related to the traumatic experience of being raped, to assure other Handmaids that their present situation has improved in comparison to their past.[78] Janine goes through a process of acceptance; her guilt becomes her major asset, and with it, like a school girl, she emerges as one of the Aunts' pets. At the beginning, she feels extremely embarrassed by her situation, and it is particularly difficult for her to confess; however, after several repetitions of the same testimony, she acquires expertise at testifying, and she ends up believing that it was entirely her fault:

> It's Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion. She told the same story last week. She seemed almost proud of it, while she was telling. It may not even be true. At Testifying, it's safer to make things up than to say you have nothing to reveal. But since it's Janine, it's probably more or less true. (71)

Janine becomes a symbol of repentance and acceptance among the women in the center. In the eyes of other women, Janine, the sinner, has accepted her sins and has received

[78] Again, one encounters a contradiction in this situation: the Commanders essentially rape the Handmaids, so their condition has not improved but actually deteriorated.

absolution.[79] By proudly telling her story at Testifying, Janine persuades other Handmaids to do the same. Even though Offred does not trust Janine's confession completely, she recognizes the need to pretend it is real.

Janine's testimony serves other purposes as well; her experience teaches other women that what happened to them is solely their own fault:

> But *whose* fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.
>
> *Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison.
>
> *Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.
>
> *She* did. *She* did. *She* did.
>
> Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?
>
> Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. (72)

The lessons gained are numerous; first, the Handmaids learn that in every case, women are guilty of rape: "her fault, her fault." Second, women in the center learn that God allows such things in order to teach them a lesson: not to behave in that way. In other words, according to the Aunts, women are always the ones who lead men to rape them. Third, women end up believing that these last two aspects are actually true. Finally, and perhaps

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[79] Clearly, the religious connotation surfaces here: "Penance is a sacrament of the New Law instituted by Christ in which forgiveness of sins committed after baptism is granted through the priest's absolution to those who with true sorrow confess their sins and promise to satisfy for the same. . . . As an outward sign it comprises the actions of the penitent in presenting himself to the priest and accusing himself of his sins, and the actions of the priest in pronouncing absolution and imposing satisfaction. This whole procedure is usually called, from one of its parts, 'confession', and it is said to take place in the 'tribunal of penance', because it is a judicial process in which the penitent is at once the accuser, the person accused, and the witness, while the priest pronounces judgment and sentence. The grace conferred is deliverance from the guilt of sin and, in the case of mortal sin, from its eternal punishment; hence also reconciliation with God, justification. Finally, the confession is made not in the secrecy of the penitent's heart nor to a layman as friend and advocate, nor to a representative of human authority, but to a duly ordained priest with requisite jurisdiction and with the 'power of the keys', i.e., the power to forgive sins which Christ granted to His Church" (Hanna).

the most important lesson learned from this, women become skilled at being against other women, which is one of the major goals in the center. The Aunts can ensure that once women are outside the center, they will continue their teachings and avoid association with other women. In the meantime, women learn to accuse and insult other women in the center:

> Last week, Janine burst into tears. Aunt Helena made her kneel at the front of the classroom, hands behind her back, where we could all see her, her red face and dripping nose. Her hair dull blond, her eyelashes so light they seemed not there, the lost eye-lashes of someone who's been in a fire. Burned eyes. She looked disgusting: weak, squirmy, blotchy, pink, like a newborn mouse. None of us wanted to look like that, ever. For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her.
>
> Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby.
>
> We meant it, which is the bad part.
>
> I used to think well of myself. I didn't then. (72)

Testifying definitely becomes a highly effective means of propaganda in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In only a week, women in the center despise Janine after seeing her crying while telling her story. The way in which the Aunts treat Janine is humiliating; thus, the other Handmaids do not want to take her position. Offred describes the scene as "disgusting," which makes the Handmaids do what they do: they degrade her. Offred acknowledges that the Handmaids' actions are terrible, but, at the same time, these reinforce one thing: they do not want to be she. Testifying works both ways; it teaches the ones who listen and the

ones who testify: “This week Janine doesn’t wait for us to jeer at her. It was my fault, she says. It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain. Very good, Janine, says Aunt Lydia. You are an example” (72). With Janine’s final testimony, every Handmaid in the center has unquestioningly learned the lesson.

The last mechanism of propaganda that the Aunts use in the center is movies and documentaries, which represent subtle but violent means of propaganda due to their visual content:

> Once a week we had movies, after lunch and before our nap. . . . Sometimes the movie she showed would be an old porno film, from the seventies or eighties. Women kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart. . . . (117-18)

Pornography from the seventies and eighties, as described by the narrator, shows women in very demeaning positions: sexual and violent ones. Surprisingly enough, the Aunts are not showing these videos to censor their obscene content but to portray women’s sexuality as a negative aspect of the time before. As Benoite Groult and Dominique Poggi argue, the portrayal of women in pornography is strongly negative, for women are depicted as potential whores and rape lovers (68-69; 76). The women from the movies are treated violently, and the representation of their sexuality is grotesque. According to the Aunts, these extremely violent movies depict the reality of many women in the time before: men treated women as objects, sexual objects.

Nowadays, the government prohibits these sexual encounters (as well as the movies themselves), ensuring "violent free" environments for women. Women should thank the Republic of Gilead for that. In this new society, according to the Aunts, men treat women with honor and respect: "Yours is a position of honor, she [Aunt Lydia] said" (13). And if the message is not clear enough, the Aunts also show the Handmaids snuff films, which promote violent acts against women and perpetuate women's submissive role: "women being raped, beaten up, killed. Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out" (118). The level of manipulation increases once the Aunts analyze the movies: "Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then. Her voice trembled with indignation" (118). Once again, with the help of the movies, the Aunts reinforce the idea that if men raped women in the *time before*, it was entirely their fault. It is clear that women are not victims but perpetrators of their own crime.

The second type of film shown to the Handmaids is documentaries about Unwomen: "Sometimes, though, the movie would be what Aunt Lydia called an Unwoman documentary" (118). These documentaries consist of women who have become despised in the present; women who in the time before fought for the right to be free from sexual violence. Evidently, for the Aunts—as representatives of the totalitarian state—these women denote the opposite:

> Imagine, said Aunt Lydia, wasting their time like that, when they should have been doing something useful. Back then, the Unwomen were always

> wasting time. They were encouraged to do it. The government gave them money to do that very thing. . . . We would have to condone some of their ideas, even today. Only some, mind you, she said coyly, raising her index finger, waggling it at us. But they were Godless, and that can make all the difference, don't you agree? (118-19)

In the novel, the pejorative term Unwomen refers to women who "were always wasting time" (118); in other words, women who instead of being at home raising children and taking care of their husbands were outside their home doing godless things such as working, for instance. Godless women do "godless things," and they are not useful for any society. For the Aunts, these women of no value represent everything that was wrong with their society years before. The Aunts even criticize the way women dress in these videos: "She's [Offred's mother, who in this present would be identified as an Unwoman] wearing the kind of outfit Aunt Lydia told us was typical of Unwomen in those days, overall jeans with a green and mauve plaid shirt underneath and sneakers on her feet. . ." (119). This simple way of dressing stands for freedom and choice, aspects women do not possess anymore. The content of the documentaries was pretty much the same; women fighting for their rights:

> The camera pans up and we see the writing, in paint, on what must have been a bedsheet: TAKE BACK THE NIGHT. This hasn't been blacked out, even though we aren't supposed to be reading. The women around me breathe in, there's a stirring in the room, like wind over grass. Is this an oversight,

> have we gotten away with something? Or is this a thing we're intended to see, to remind us of the old days of no safety? (119)

In the late seventies and early eighties, women took to the streets of some countries around the world to literally reclaim the night; they were at that time afraid of walking alone due to the risk of being raped and murdered. Women decided to put a halt to this and reclaim their right to walk alone and feel safe. Sexual crimes committed against women, including pornography, led to the creation of the marches titled "TAKE BACK THE NIGHT" ("Take Back"), which is shown in the documentaries. Unfortunately, the Aunts and other women in the center distort the main message from these protests; instead of focusing on the positive aspect of these protests, their focus is on the negative: they are Unwomen merely because of the fact of fighting against something that they are responsible for: women, according to the new set of beliefs in Gilead, were, are, and will always be guilty if men rape them. To "remind [them] of the old days of no safety" simply serves as a way to escape reality. These strong and independent women in the documentaries are sadly used to frighten other women in the present.

The final aspect regarding movies and documentaries is related to sound: "They don't play the soundtrack, on movies like these [documentaries], though they do on the porno films. They want us to hear the screams and grunts and shrieks of what is supposed to be either extreme pain or extreme pleasure or both at once, but they don't want us to hear what the Unwomen are saying" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 119). Needless to say, the Aunts' convenient use of sound to either shock or silence women is their most important mechanism of persuasion. The combination of images and sound in

pornographic films results in the corruption of the sexual act itself. However, the silent images shown in the documentaries teach other women to remain silent. In the end, the Aunts use both types of films, pornographic movies and documentaries, to control the Handmaids by showing them what they are not supposed to be: Unwomen.

Propaganda Outside the Rachel and Leah Center

The use of propaganda is not exclusive to the Rachel and Leah Center. Outside the Center, the means of propaganda are vastly effective as well. This new set of teachings comes from different sources that range from symbols and rituals to TV news reports. One of the major symbols of propaganda in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the Wall.[80] A symbol of absolute power, the Wall's main purpose is that of perpetuating horror among Gilead's population by solely looking at it. Without the use of actual words, the Wall functions as a visual warning to those who reject the system. Dissidents, and whoever does not fit in this new dystopian society, are accused, condemned, assassinated, and hung on the Wall so that everyone can see what happens to those who refuse to follow Gilead's patriarchal rules and principles. Offred, like the rest of the Handmaids, understands that the dead bodies accomplish a specific purpose: "What we are supposed to feel towards these bodies is hatred and scorn" (33).

[80] Needless to say, the Wall makes an allusion to the Berlin Wall, a wall that attempts to separate the city, and at the same time keep those inside protected from the "dangers" of the outside world. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as we will see, the purpose of the Wall goes beyond the protection of Gilead's citizens.

Through the use of corpses, Gilead citizens can see the concrete consequences of becoming non-believers. The message then is quite clear: the punishment for those who rebel against the system is death, and no one is exempted from this. At any time, any citizen might be hung for his or her crimes: “These men [doctors who performed abortions in the time before], we’ve been told, are like war criminals. It’s no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive” (33). Unquestionably, the Wall has the ability to convey strong emotions, such as despair and distress to those citizens who are forced to look at it.

Offred and her daily companion Ofglen, another Handmaid, encounter the Wall in each of their daily walks; they both are highly attracted to it, as most people: “Now we turn our backs on the church and there is the thing we’ve in truth come to see: the Wall” (31). The attraction that the Handmaids and others have toward the Wall is based on both curiosity and fear. The lack of corpses, for instance, projects feelings of uncertainty and terror: “Somehow the Wall is even more foreboding when it’s empty like this. When there’s someone hanging on it at least you know the worst. But vacant, it is also potential, like a storm approaching” (166). When the Wall is empty, as Offred analyzes, the possibility of the murder of people you may know, or even themselves is plausible, but when there are bodies on it, those who see it enjoy a momentary feeling of relief: this time, at least, it is not they who are up there.

The description of the Wall resembles the deterioration of the city and the passage of time:

> The Wall is hundreds of years old too; or over a hundred, at least. Like the sidewalks, it's red brick, and must once have been plain but handsome. Now the gates have sentries and there are ugly new floodlights mounted on metal posts above it, and barbed wire along the bottom and broken glass set in concrete along the top. (31)

The Wall has survived the passage of time, but its appearance and purpose have not. According to the narrator, in the past the building must have been a "handsome" building; in fact, the building used to be a university. However, nowadays the Wall is "ugly" due to its prison-like structure. Its purpose in the present differs from the past; the building used to shelter students who were hungry for knowledge and who were able to come and go at will. Nowadays, the guards, the artificial lamps, and the wire and glass placed on top of the Wall resemble a prison and convey a very different message: once inside the Wall, there is no escape. As Offred later admits, the Wall does not keep others from entering it; it is there to prevent people from escaping: "No one goes through those gates willingly. The precautions are for those trying to get out, though to make it even as far as the Wall, from the inside, past the electronic alarm system, would be next to impossible" (31).

Inside the Wall, dissidents are punished by death in public ceremonies; outside of it, the rest of the population witnesses the consequences of rebelling against the system. Consequently, the Wall teaches Gilead citizens their most precious lesson: "Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders. There must have been a Men's Salvaging early this morning. I didn't hear the bells. Perhaps I've become used to

them" (32). The bodies hanging on the Wall are constant reminders of what happens to traitors and dissidents. The white bags serve a double purpose as well. People cannot identify the person behind the bags and at the same time they convey the idea that anyone can be up there, including those who are at present watching them. These faceless creatures stand for everyone and no one at the same time.

The means of propaganda have reached a turning point in this dystopian society; words are not necessary to threaten people with the consequences of their actions: people must know what can happen to them if they fail to follow the rules. Under this view, propaganda changes its mechanism of coverage. Offred knows this, and she emphasizes the fact that it is not the first time, or probably the last one, that she sees the bodies on the wall and that she has "become used to them." The Wall transmits a clear message: betray the system and the Wall will be your punishment. Offred continues, "We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they'll be there for days, until there's a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them." Offred and the rest of the people must see the hanging bodies on the Wall; they must know that negative acts will in fact be punished with death. Blood taints the wall and there will be more: "What they are hanging from is hooks. The hooks have been set into the brickwork of the Wall, for this purpose. Not all of them are occupied. The hooks look like appliances for the armless. Or steel question marks, upside-down and sideways" (32). Who will be next?

Atwood describes the faceless bodies hanging on the Wall in terms of inert objects, such as scarecrows and dolls, which helps Offred cope with the reality of dealing with dead people:

> It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be. It makes the men like dolls on which the faces have not yet been painted; like scarecrows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare. Or as if their heads are sacks, stuffed with some undifferentiated material, like flour or dough. It's the obvious heaviness of the heads, their vacancy, the way gravity pulls them down and there's no life anymore to hold them up. The heads are zeros. (32)

When comparing the corpses with dolls or scarecrows, both inanimate objects, Offred is trying to minimize the terrible fact that she is actually in front of dead people. These doll-like characters become easy to deal with because they do not reveal any kind of emotion. Since their faces are covered with bags, the rest of their bodies seem incomplete in the eyes of the narrator. As is commonly known, scarecrows' main function is that of keeping crows and other birds away from the crops so they do not eat and destroy them. In similar fashion, Offred recognizes that the bodies on the Wall scare others in order for them to follow the principles of the Republic of Gilead.

In the mind of the narrator, the Wall fulfills one final goal: Offred is terrified and faces her depressing reality. After looking at the bodies for a long time, Offred accepts that the dolls are not dolls at all but men who bleed:

> Though if you look and look, as we are doing, you can see the outlines of the features under the white cloth, like gray shadows . . .
>
> But on one bag there's blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth, a small red one, like the mouths painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children. A child's idea of a smile. This smile of blood is what fixes the attention, finally. These are not snowmen after all. (32)

The description of the corpses seems to become extremely personal and emotional in the words of the narrator. After analyzing the outline of the bodies, Offred starts thinking about her husband:

> These bodies hanging on the Wall are time travelers, anachronisms. They've come here from the past.
>
> What I feel towards them is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel. What I feel is partly relief, because none of these men is Luke. Luke wasn't a doctor. Isn't. (33)

Offred's main concern is regarding her husband's destiny since his body may at any time appear on the Wall. She, on the other hand, out of genuine terror, has already taken precautions in order not to get caught and end up on the Wall.

The last and most common agent of propaganda in *The Handmaid's Tale* is television, particularly news reports. Even though Offred and the rest of the Handmaids are not permitted to watch television or get informed in any way, the night of the procreation ceremony, Serena Joy "allows" Offred to watch the news for a little while:

> Several blank channels, then the news. This is what she's [Serena Joy] been looking for. She leans back, inhales deeply. I on the contrary lean forward, a child being allowed up late with the grown-ups. This is the one good thing about these evenings, the evenings of the Ceremony: I'm allowed to watch the news. It seems to be an unspoken rule in this household: we always get here on time, he's always late, Serena always lets us watch the news. (82)

Once again, like a child, certain privileges are granted to Offred. During the night of the ceremony, while Serena and the rest are waiting for the commander, Offred has the chance to get informed about what is happening outside the boundaries of Gilead. Casually enough, the news that she sees on television are related to the religious war that the world is facing:

> First, the front lines. They are not lines, really: the war seems to be going on in many places at once.
>
> . . . The Appalachian Highlands, says the voice-over, where the Angels of the Apocalypse, Fourth Division, are smoking out a pocket of Baptist guerillas, with air support from the Twenty-first Battalion of the Angels of Light. We are shown two helicopters, black ones with silver wings painted on the sides. Below them, a clump of trees explodes. (82)

The fact that Offred watches these news is not a coincidence. She is meant to see the efforts that the Angels make to protect Gilead's citizens so that they can fulfill their own roles. The names of the different subdivisions are biblical allusions, and the Angels with its silver wings are religious symbols as well. The reminder becomes quite clear: the different

forces are fighting on behalf of God and therefore their actions are justified. In spite of this, fear is behind the images transmitted on television: those who are outside Gilead are at the mercy of an endless war; those who are inside are protected from it:

> This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the center, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you. (23)

The menace of war intensifies the control that the government has over its citizens. If people remain exactly where they are and follow Gilead's rules, they will be kept "safe." Citizens are made to believe that the Republic of Gilead is "within" them, so their responsibility is to help protect what others have built for them.

Offred, at first, feels enthusiastic about watching television; later, however, she realizes that this—like other "privileges" they give her—has an ulterior motive as well, not for her own benefit but for the benefit of all. On the surface, the news that Offred watches seem to be boring reports on wars and other matters as a way to persuade her and others that their condition is better than those who are outside Gilead; nevertheless, Offred questions the reliability and truthfulness of these news reports: "Such as it is: who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none" (82). Offred's strong desire to find about what is going on in the world makes her ignore the possibility of forged news at first. After watching for a while, she returns to her first thought: "They only show us

victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news? Possibly he's an actor" (83). Unable to believe in what she sees, Offred clearly resists this means of propaganda. She continues,

> The anchorman comes on now. His manner is kindly, fatherly; he gazes out at us from the screen, looking, with his tan and his white hair and candid eyes, wise wrinkles around them, like everybody's ideal grandfather. What he's telling us, his level smile implies, is for our own good. Everything will be all right soon. I promise. There will be peace. You must trust. You must go to sleep, like good children.
>
> He tells us what we long to believe. He's very convincing.
>
> I struggle against him. He's like an old movie star, I tell myself, with false teeth and a face job. At the same time I sway towards him, like one hypnotized. If only it were true. If only I could believe. (83)

The anchorman, the "ideal grandfather," does not deceive Offred. She knows exactly what they are doing. Offred recognizes that the anchorman treats his viewers as children, and like children, they should believe what they see on television. Even though she is drawn towards this man, Offred struggles against this system of manipulation and control. She desperately wants to believe in what she sees; her hope for a better future is all that she has.

Propaganda is perhaps the strongest mechanism used in the novel to control and manipulate the inhabitants of the Republic of Gilead—whether by subtle means or forthright ones. Through the use of different discourses, including fear, religion and tradition, the Republic of Gilead indoctrinates women inside and outside the Red Center.

Indoctrination is essentially and unmistakably reached through the use of power and power has many faces. Inside the center, the Aunts, as representatives of the system, educate women through speeches, testimonies and movies. Outside, symbols such as the Wall and television help to convince them to accept and fulfill their new role in this dystopian society. The common denominator of all of these discourses and symbols is the capacity to provoke fear and thus the ability to control those who experience it. By means of propaganda, particularly one that incites fear, the government achieves mass control. If the government shows its citizens—instead of just telling them—the dreadful consequences of their actions, the most obvious and rational response is to look for mechanisms of protection. Their emotional response is absolute terror, but their rational one is to secure their future by avoiding any kind of risk. In other words, the citizens of the Republic of Gilead, particularly women, do what the system tells them to do in order to survive. As in any totalitarian state, the Republic of Gilead is under the control of a few people, unknown to the rest, but capable of governing them by the simple fact of inducing fear through propaganda. Those who the government forces to accept the system are constantly reminded of the consequences of rejecting their role, making them "choose" not to follow the same path as those who refuse to accept it—the dead ones mostly. Those who survive, the dissidents, Chomsky states, have "to be driven back to the apathy, obedience and passivity that is their proper state" (29). Citizens, particularly women, must learn that disobeying their rulers has fatal consequences. In a successful propaganda campaign, voices are silenced and identities are destroyed. But not everything is lost; inside the narration of *herstory*, Offred remains hopeful and learns to write a new story.

CHAPTER IV:
GENDER AND POWER IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

The Origins of Gender Inequality

> Eva del varón fuiste tomada
> hueso de sus huesos
> carne de su carne
> ¿cómo pudiste pecar?
> ¿cómo osaste codiciar
> los frutos del árbol
> del bien y del mal?
> Eva maldita serás
> de tu marido será tu deseo
> y has de llamarle amo y señor
> Eva parirás con dolor.
>
> Pedro Guerra, "Eva"

The Republic of Gilead has as its foundation a strong religious discourse. The discourse is simple, subtle, but distorted. The inhabitants of Gilead are taught that they must accept a new system of rules, commands, and laws, for in their hands is the key to preserve humanity and save the world. The justification for this is divine and indisputable; it is the word of God. Religious and Biblical allusions permeate Gilead; from naming to everyday rituals, religion is an inherent feature in these people's lives. Ironically, there are no churches in Gilead, nor places where people can freely profess their religious beliefs. Actually, no clear religion is identifiable; there are no priests, ministers or any other figure that serves as the head of the church. In one of Offred's paired walks, she evidences how the church, as an institution, has lost all its power and instead has become a museum: "The church is a small one, one of the first erected here, hundreds of years ago. It isn't used

anymore, except as a museum. Inside it you can see paintings, of women in long somber dresses, their hair covered by white caps, and of upright men, darkly clothed and unsmiling. Our ancestors. Admission is free" (31). The symbolism of the church, traditionally speaking, has changed. The ancestors Offred refers to were the Puritans, who were fervent believers of the Bible and sermons, had a very strict moral code, and killed a lot of women whom they thought were witches and were related to the devil. As mentioned earlier in this work, religion is the perfect tool of domination, for its practices involve the absolute belief in a deity and the prohibition to question or defy the system of beliefs. The religious discourse in Atwood's novel is, without a doubt, a mechanism of power and mass control that classifies Gilead inhabitants and separates them according to gender and function.

Religious Discourse Inside the Rachel and Leah Center

Genesis 30.1-5[81] constitutes the foundation of the Republic of Gilead. According to the Biblical story, the sisters Rachel and Leah married Jacob, but only Leah was able to bear him children at first. Envious of her sister's four children, Rachel, as was customary at that time, decided to use her maid Bilhah in order to have Jacob's children. Bilhah gave birth successfully to two sons. Following her sister's example, Leah asked Jacob to sleep with her maid Zilpah also who gave him two more sons (*King James Bible*, Gen. 30-31). As a

[81] "And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And she gave him Bilhah her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her. And Bilhah conceived, and bare Jacob a son" (*King James Bible*, Gen. 30.1-5).

consequence of several disasters, including nuclear-plant accidents, most women in Gilead are unable to bear children. Thus, the government decides to institute surrogacy and forces a group of women to perform that function in Gilead. In other words, the decision of who becomes a surrogate mother and the terms for this arrangement are not decided by women. Surrogacy is no longer voluntary but a mandate of the regime.

The Handmaids, all Bilhahs and Zilpahs now, learn the relevancy of their new forced role in the Red Center. Deprived of all their possessions, the Aunts teach the Handmaids to detach themselves from the "material world" and to embrace "spiritual values" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 64). These values involve a "return to traditional values" (7) where women's most valuable assets are their abilities to bear children and to obey others. While in the Red Center, the Aunts make use of the Rachel and Leah's passage to indoctrinate the Handmaids so they can internalize this form of procreation. Offred tells us,

> Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* And so on and so forth. We had it read to us every breakfast, as we sat in the high school cafeteria. . . . (88-89)

Moreover, the Handmaids become accustomed to other everyday speeches based on religious discourse. For instance, they learn, as the traditional discourse dictates, that women are to be blamed for original sin. In the words of Kate Millett, "The connection of woman, sex and sin constitutes the fundamental pattern of western patriarchal thought

thereafter" (54). According to the story, the serpent, which represents evil, tempts Eve, Adam's wife, to eat the forbidden fruit, which symbolizes knowledge[82] of both good and evil. Because of this disobedient act, both are expelled from the Garden of Eden, and as punishment, Eve, and by default all women, will now suffer the pain of childbirth (*King James Bible*, Gen. 3). "The Fall," Offred reminds us, "was a fall from innocence to knowledge" (195).

Inside the Red Center, Offred and the other Handmaids learn that in order to be valuable women again, they need to experience this pain: "Once they drugged women, induced labor, cut them open, sewed them up. No more. No anesthetics, even. Aunt Elizabeth said it was better for the baby, but also: *I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children*" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 114). Aunt Elizabeth uses the story of Eve and her punishment to teach the Handmaids that everything that was done in order to alleviate childbirth pain or help women ease labor in the time before is now considered immoral for religious reasons. Aunt Elizabeth does not finish the verse, though: "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (*King James Bible*, Gen. 3.16). The part that she omits is implicit; at this point in their indoctrination, the Handmaids know that men are the ones in charge.

[82] One of the most important premises of feminism in general, unsurprisingly, is the search for knowledge. Women are kept silent and uneducated for a simple reason: easy control and domination. Knowledge and education, on the other hand, can give women voice and power.

Besides the passages from the Bible, the Aunts teach the Handmaids how to pray and what to pray for:

> . . . kneeling at the foot of the bed, knees on the hard wood of the gym floor, Aunt Elizabeth standing by the double doors, arms folded, cattle prod hung on her belt, while Aunt Lydia strides along the rows of kneeling nightgowned women, hitting our backs or feet or bums or arms lightly, just a flick, a tap, with her wooden pointer if we slouch or slacken. She wanted our heads bowed just right, our toes together and pointed, our elbows at the proper angle . . . she knew too the spiritual value of bodily rigidity, of muscle strain: a little pain cleans out the mind, she'd say. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 194)

The violence in this scene cannot be overlooked. While the Handmaids are praying next to their beds, the Aunts make use of both physical violence to force them to keep the proper posture and psychological violence to force them to obey. This environment of violence can be easily compared to the way animals are trained. People or animal trainers usually hit the animal slightly in order to correct improper behavior or to teach them new ones. The cattle prod image is self-explanatory: a cattle prod is used to prod or drive livestock. Thus, in this scene, the Handmaids are treated like a group of animals, and, with the use of violence while praying, they are expected to behave the same, to have the same responses, and to obey their masters.

Regarding the contents of the prayers, Offred states,

> What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies.
>
> Oh God, King of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man.
>
> Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled. . . . (194)

The Handmaids' prayer is related to their unique role in Gilead: to procreate. From a religious perspective, the Handmaids are the ultimate Eves, responsible for repopulating the Earth, even if it is through pain and sacrifice that they will accomplish it, but also responsible for the possible extinction of the human population if they fail to fulfill their role.

Besides listening to the Rachel and Leah Biblical account, the Handmaids are also forced to listen to the Beatitudes every day: "*Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent. . . . Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted*" (89). The Beatitudes refer to "[t]he solemn blessings . . . which mark the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, the very first of Our Lord's sermons" (Van Kasteren). As a group, they teach people how they have to behave in order to obtain God's reward, particularly "the kingdom of heaven" (*King James Bible*, Matt. 5.3). In the Rachel and Leah Center, however, the Beatitudes are used to teach the Handmaids specific lessons of humility, submissiveness, and suffering; they use the Beatitudes in order to persuade the Handmaids that the reward for the sacrifice they are making will come not in this life, but in the afterlife. The Beatitudes are manipulated, changed to force the Handmaids to behave in a certain way: the Beatitude

"*Blessed are the silent*" is fabricated. What the regime wants is women without voices. The Beatitudes consists of two parts. However, two of them are incomplete, for the second part refers to aspects the Handmaids will never experience: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall *inherit the earth*. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain *mercy*" (*King James Bible*, Matt. 5.5,7; emphasis added). The Handmaids are disposable reproductive vessels in Gilead; they will never be rewarded, not even treated as human beings. The omission of the second part of these beatitudes is for the Handmaids to focus on the aspects Gilead needs them to focus on, for the benefit of all.

Religious Discourse Outside the Rachel and Leah Center

As previously discussed, men have predominately dominated religions, and the Republic of Gilead is not an exception. Naming has a powerful religious connotation in the novel. The name Gilead appears several times in the Bible; its meaning "the hill of testimony" ("Gilead") is exactly what the Republic of Gilead represents: a living testimony of (for some) a better life or (for others) a living hell: "Gilead is within you" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 23), Aunt Lydia reminds us. The Republic of Gilead has a theocratic government; in other words, God is the supreme ruler, and those appointed by the system are the authorities that work on behalf of God. Only those in power have access to the Bible (the Commanders) or prayers at Soul Scrolls (the Commanders' Wives), and those are intended for official use only. Any act of heresy or treason in Gilead is considered to be an act against the government and hence punishable. The punishment is always death.

There are two specific instances where Offred implicitly shows us the consequences of defying the system. The first one is related to the ability to bear children and God's role in it: "'Maybe he can't,' she [Serena Joy] says. I [Offred] don't know who she means. Does she mean the Commander, or God? If it's God, she should say *won't*. Either way it's heresy. It's only women who can't, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective" (204). The responsibility to procreate lies on women, not men. In Gilead, men function on behalf of God and hence they are powerful, perfect, while women are defective. Offred is aware that to question either God's will or men's ability to procreate is an act of heresy. The second instance is related to the figure of God and the prayers at Soul Scrolls: "At last Ofglen speaks. 'Do you think God listens,' she says, 'to these machines?' She is whispering: our habit at the Center. In the past this would have been a trivial enough remark, a kind of scholarly speculation. Right now it's treason. . . . Subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one" (168). In a theocracy, to question or defy the system is to question God himself. "*God*," Offred reminds us, "*Is a National Resource*" (213), and the Wall, as was analyzed before, is the direct consequence of questioning God's will.

Religious terminology pervades Gilead: from the naming of places—the Rachel and Leah Center, the name of the different stores—to the naming and classification of people—the Angels, the Handmaids—the use of religious language seeks to remind citizens that theirs is a theocracy. The names of the stores, for instance, are now identified through symbols and pictures instead of words, for the Handmaids and other female groups are not allowed to read, not even store names: "The store has a huge wooden sign outside it, in the shape of a golden lily; Lilies of the Field, it's called. You can see the place, under the lily,

where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone" (25). The names of the stores, Lilies of the Field, Milk and Honey, All Flesh, Loaves and Fishes have a religious connotation; they are all names taken from the Bible.

Besides naming, everyday rituals, such as greeting and saying goodbye, are strictly in the form of religious expression. In her first encounter with her shopping partner, Ofglen states, "Blessed be the fruit" to which Offred responds "May the Lord open". Both phrases are "the accepted greeting [and response] among us [Handmaids]" (19) and they both clearly reflect their role in Gilead; the fruit refers to a potential baby while the second phrase refers to the idea that God is the one who provides it. Another accepted farewell is the phrase "Under his Eye" (45) which makes reference to both God and the Eyes, the group in charge of observing, on behalf of God, the citizens of Gilead: "The Eyes of God run over all the earth" (193).

Outside the Rachel and Leah Center, prayers significantly differ from the ones the Handmaids learn. People do not have to kneel to say their prayers; instead, they can buy them and a machine can say the prayers for them. Soul Scrolls is the store where this happens: "It's a franchise: there are Soul Scrolls in every city center, in every suburb, or so they say" (166). Offred continues, "What the machines print is prayers, roll upon roll, prayers going out endlessly. They're ordered by Compuphone, I've overheard the Commander's Wife doing it. Ordering prayers from Soul Scrolls is supposed to be a sign of piety and faithfulness to the regime, so of course the Commanders' Wives do it a lot. It helps their husbands' careers." The prayers have now acquired a political meaning instead

of a religious or spiritual one. As mentioned before, state and religion are one in a theocratic government, so any sign of "piety and faithfulness to the regime" is a sign of piety and faithfulness to God. In addition, praying has now been limited to five topics: "for health, wealth, a death a birth, a sin," and it has been made automatic: "You pick the one you want, punch in the number, then punch in your own number so your account will be debited, and punch in the number of times you want the prayer repeated." People no longer say these prayers aloud, and hardly ever does anyone listen to "the toneless metallic voices repeating the same thing over and over." Once the prayer is done, it is recycled, recyclable prayers through machines that have "an eye painted in gold on the side, flanked by two small golden wings" (167). The prayers, in short, are a source of income for the regime.

Religion is also part of several rituals held outside the Rachel and Leah Center: Men's and Women's Salvagings, Particicutions, Prayvaganzas, and obviously, the Ceremony. All of these rituals have three aspects in common: First, they are public events, which means attendance is mandatory. Second, they all rely on a violent act, either the killing of a person or forced sex. And finally, they are all performed under the motto "for the benefit of all." The first ritual, Men's and Women's Salvagings, is the actual murder of dissenters. Sentenced to death, these dissenters' heads are covered with a "white bag," and those who attend need to show their "consent," their "complicity" (276). Ironically, the name refers to salvation which is reached through the act of killing. They are segregated, demonstrating how even at the level of death, men and women are treated differently (272). After the dissidents are murdered, their bodies are hung on the Wall as reminders

for the rest. Salvagings are televised and less frequent every year: “There is less need for them,” Offred states, “These days we are so well behaved” (273). The crimes these women committed are not mentioned during the event, for the Aunts fear other Handmaids may emulate them: “The crimes of others are a secret language among us” (275), Offred asserts.

Particicutions are also killing rituals; however, they differ from Salvagings in terms of violent and graphic content. The Handmaids are in charge of killing the accused by hitting and kicking the person. The only Particicution described in the novel happens immediately after the Salvaging previously analyzed. The instructions Aunt Lydia gives to the Handmaids resemble a game or a competition where the players are waiting for the whistle that tells them “Go”: “‘You know the rules for a Particicution,’ Aunt Lydia says. ‘You will wait until I blow the whistle. After that, what you do is up to you, until I blow the whistle again. Understood?’” The accused “has been convicted of rape” (278), Aunt Lydia announces. “The penalty for rape, as you know, is death. Deuteronomy 22:23-29” (278-79).[83] The verses are taking literally from the Bible and used as justification to kill a man, even though this man claims to be innocent, an argument supported by Ofglen who claims he is a political not a rapist (279-80). Both events, the Salvaging and the Particicution, as everything else in the Republic of Gilead, are shows for others, a form of entertainment and a clear warning for Gilead inhabitants.

[83] The Ceremony, as I will analyze, is a rape act disguised as a procreation ritual; however, the Commanders are not considered criminals for they are just playing their part. It is the government who controls people’s sexuality.

Prayvaganzas are a different kind of ritual: "Women's Prayvaganzas are for group weddings like this, usually. The men's are for military victories. These are the things we are supposed to rejoice in the most, respectively" (220). Besides emphasizing each gender's role in Gilead, Prayvaganzas serve as a reminder that women have lost their right to decide whom to marry. At Women's Prayvaganzas, very young women, identified as Daughters[84] in the novel, are given away in marriage to Angels as rewards. Attendance is mandatory as well: "to demonstrate how obedient and pious we are," Offred claims. Even though murders do not take place during Prayvaganza, latent violence is present through the presence of Guardians who patrol the Handmaids: "Each has a submachine gun slung ready, for whatever dangerous or subversive acts they think we might commit inside." Prayvaganzas are also shows, a form of entertainment, televised and watched by others: "I suppose it's a form of entertainment, like a show or a circus" (213).

In the last ritual, the Ceremony, attendance is also mandatory, but in this case it is reduced to the members of each household: the Commander, his Wife, his chauffeur, his Marthas, and his Handmaids. The Commander (Fred) comes in with his black uniform, opens the box where the Bible is kept locked up, lifts out the Bible, sits down, and starts reading (powerful men are the only ones allowed to read the Bible now). The passages he reads are the ones Offred has learned in the center: "It's the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*" (88). He also reads the story of Rachel and Leah that concludes like this: "And Leah said, God hath given

[84] "Patriarchal societies do not readily sell their sons, but their daughters are all for sale sooner or later" (Showalter, "Toward a Feminist" 130).

me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband." The former verse refers to Leah's fifth child. Her reward, as Leah says in the verse, is the possibility of bearing her own child as a result of giving her maid to her husband. After the reading, the Commander urges them to pray silently: "We will ask for a blessing, and for success in all our ventures" (90). Finally, the Commander finishes this part of the ritual by saying: "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to know himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him" (92). After this, everyone is dismissed except for the Commander, his Wife, and his Handmaid, who are the ones performing the actual ritual. In all the rituals, religion is used to justify the acts; from naming to the use of the scriptures to manipulate others, religious discourse becomes the mechanical element that moves the lives of the citizens of Gilead.

Outside the walls that protect the inside of the Republic of Gilead, a religious war takes place; religious influence takes now a different connotation. On the night of the Ceremony, the Commander's Wife, Serena Joy, allows Offred and the rest to watch the news, allowing them to learn what is going on beyond the limits of Gilead:

> First, the front lines. They are not lines, really: the war seems to be going on in many places at once.
>
> Wooded hills, seen from above, the trees a sickly yellow. I wish she'd fix the color. The Appalachian Highlands, says the voice-over, where the Angels of the Apocalypse, Fourth Division, are smoking out a pocket of Baptist guerillas, with air support from the Twenty-first Battalion of the Angels of

> Light. We are shown two helicopters, black ones with silver wings painted on the sides. Below them, a clump of trees explodes. (82)

Like the Inquisition, witch hunts, and other religious persecutions in history, the religious war that takes place outside Gilead has a divine justification. The religious connotation is evident with the names of the different war bands: the Angels of the Apocalypse, Baptist guerillas, the Angels of Light. As with most aspects of Gilead, we, the readers, do not know much about these wars, for the ones in power decide what, when, and how much Offred and the others are allowed to know. Offred is conscious that all they show on TV are "victories, never defeats" and that everything is "for our own good." The anchorman, a paternal figure, as described by Offred, is the one who reminds them of this: "Everything will be all right soon. I promise. There will be peace. You must trust" (83).

In addition to the news regarding the war, the anchorman also informs the citizens of Gilead (those who are allowed to watch the news) that the Eyes have captured "five members of the heretical sect of Quakers . . . and [that] more arrests are anticipated" (83). The Quakers, or the Society of Friends, is a well-known organization both in Europe and America. From 1755 to 1766, the Society banned slaveholding, promoting emancipation and helping slaves escape to the North through an underground network (*History*). The reference, then, is clear: Quakers are opponents of the patriarchal, theocratic government of Gilead, and for that reason, they are persecuted. As in any other totalitarian state, whoever opposes the regime, as we learn in the novel, will be sentenced to death.

Gender Inequality: The Result of Religious Discriminatory Practices

> But surely Adam cannot be excused,
> Her fault though great, yet he was most to blame;
> What weakness offered, strength might have refused,
> Being Lord of all, the greater was his shame.
>
> Amelia Lanier, "Eve's Apology in Defense of Women"

Linda Woodhead argues that "[a]ttention to gender demands attention to power because gender is inseparably bound up with the unequal distribution of power in society" ("Gender" 5). From a religious perspective, that unequal distribution of power between women and men is supported entirely by the Bible. As seen before, Biblical stories are taken literally in the Republic of Gilead, and a strong religious discourse represents the foundation of the regime. Evidently, both the Bible and the religious discourse are manipulated and used in order to control and dominate the citizens of Gilead, particularly women, for "[t]he future is in their hands," Aunt Lydia likes to emphasize (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 47). The Biblical episode of Adam and Eve, for instance, has been used for centuries to diminish women's role in society, for women are considered weaker and more likely to fall into temptation than men.

The religious discourse in Gilead works as a system of power, predominately dominated by men. "The biblical narrative," Esther Fuchs argues, "legislates and authorizes the political subordination of women" (7), and according to Cheryl Exum, "In the narratives of the Bible, women are usually minor characters in the stories of men." This kind of stories, Exum continues, "become anything other than the study of men's views of women." In

other words, women's stories are told through a male perspective only. Thus, she advocates for the subversion of these men's stories, stepping outside the androcentric ideology and "construct[ing] feminist (sub)versions of biblical narratives and to claim for women a voice" (9). This is exactly what this work attempts to do.

Gender roles, those assigned to women and men based on religious discourse, differ significantly. According to Exum, in "androcentric texts like the Bible, women are often made to speak and act against their own interests" (11). The same happens in the Republic of Gilead. Women are forced to adopt new roles that define them in terms of functionality while men adopt their roles in terms of social, economic, and political superiority. As discussed earlier in this work, men's superiority over women has a religious justification. According to Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett, men believe they either have the heavenly or the birth right to dominate women. Traditionally, women are expected to focus on domestic roles and motherhood. Men, on the other hand, are expected to focus on roles involving power and decision-making. Values such as humility, obedience, chastity, and submissiveness are highly appreciated in women while values such as leadership, strength, courage, and independence are admired in men.

Based on both traditional and religious discourse, the women and men in the Republic of Gilead are classified according to the function they may now serve in the totalitarian regime. Most men hold positions of power (the One) while women become the Other and are defined by the One. In the hierarchical structure of Gilead, certain groups of men are at the top of the hierarchy. All women in Gilead, on the other hand, hold inferior positions and are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Powerful male groups in the novel are the

Eyes, the Angels, the Guardians of the Faith, and the Commanders of the Faithful. Powerless female groups in the novel are the Commander's Wives, the Aunts, the Marthas, the Econowives, and the Unwomen.[85] In the previous chapter, I discussed the roles of the Eyes, the Angels, and the Guardians of the Faith in terms of surveillance in the Republic of Gilead. I will now analyze the different functions they serve in the regime and then focus on the role of the Commanders, who are the most powerful male group.

Gender Roles in Gilead: The Case of Men

The Guardians of the Faith and the Angels are in charge of the military service inside and outside the Republic of Gilead. The Guardians patrol women inside Gilead while the Angels mostly fight the religious war outside Gilead; however, some Angels remain inside Gilead and help patrol women as well. A Guardian may be promoted to the category of Angel and allowed to marry (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 22). If their new Wives cannot bear children, then the Angels will qualify for Handmaids (221). Moreover, each Commander's household is assigned one or more Guardians to perform different activities that go from transporting people, to take the Handmaids from one household to another, for instance, washing cars, delivering groceries at the stores to digging up the Wives' gardens and mowing the lawn.

The Guardians wear green uniforms and carry guns, mainly those who are assigned to the barriers and checkpoints. In one of Offred's encounters with the Guardians, she

[85] I will analyze the other two groups of women, the Handmaids and the Jezebels, in the following section, for their role is strictly related to their sexuality.

clarifies that they "aren't real soldiers," diminishing their role to "routine policing" and "menial functions" (113). Regarding their age, there are both old and young Guardians. However, the younger ones, Offred tells us, "are the most dangerous, the most fanatical, the jumpiest with their guns. They haven't yet learned about existence through time. You have to go slowly with them" (20). The last remark is regarding an incident where a Martha was shot to death because the Guardians believed "she was a man in disguise" (20). The Guardians are not allowed to speak with women, unless it is strictly required. Their major role is to protect women, particularly those who are pregnant: "[I]t's dangerous for her [a pregnant Handmaid] to be out, there must be a Guardian standing outside the door, waiting for her. Now that she's the carrier of life, she is closer to death, and needs special security. Jealousy could get her. It's happened before" (26).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Eyes are the most symbolic group in the novel and the most feared as well because of their invisibility. They are hardly ever seen, but when they appear, in their black-painted vans, people become terrified: "When they pass, we avert our eyes." The windows of these vans are dark-tinted and the men inside wear dark glasses: "a double obscurity" (22), Offred explains. They own most of the buildings in the city where rituals are held: "We aren't allowed inside the buildings anymore; but who would want to go in? Those buildings belong to the Eyes" (166). Some Guardians are actually "Eyes incognito" (20), so the citizens have to be extra careful in their presence. The first time Offred sees Nick (the Guardian assigned in the household she is in now) he winks at her, to which Offred immediately wonders if he is a spy, an Eye: "Perhaps

it was a test, to see what I would do" (18). When in Gilead they say that "The Eyes of God run over all the earth" (193), they mean these men in their gray suits.

The Commanders of the Faithful is the group of powerful men who hold a superior social, economic, and political position in the Republic of Gilead: "Ordinary guys do not become Commanders" (184), Offred's Commander tells her. They also wear uniforms: black, "the color of prestige" (17). They are married and have, as part of their household, Marthas and Guardians for their service. Commanders are usually mature men, and each of them is assigned a Handmaid every two years with the purpose of procreating. They are the head of their household, which means that they are the ones in control of everything that happens inside their homes; they are the ruler of women: "The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part" (81). While all the women in the household have very specific domestic roles, the Commanders' role is mostly outside their homes: "[They] work long hours. [They have] a lot of responsibilities" (90). Their offices at home are sacred places, locked, no woman is allowed inside: these are "forbidden room[s] . . . where women do not go . . . and the cleaning is done by Guardians. What secrets, what male totems are kept in here?" Offred wonders.

Being a Commander has several benefits, from having access to the black market to attending the city's brothel. They even have a specific area in the city where they all live in what it seem to be very large houses (23). They also get special food: coffee and meat, which not all households are able to afford (10, 27). They are in charge of two of the most important rituals in Gilead: Prayvaganzas and the Ceremony. In Prayvaganzas, the

Commanders' presence is so strong that they do not even need to say anything so others will pay attention: "He gazes over the room, and our soft voices die. He doesn't even have to raise his hands" (218). Commanders get promoted if the Ceremony, the most important ritual in Gilead, is successful; in other words, if the Commander's Handmaid becomes pregnant, the pregnancy comes to term, and the product is not declared an Unbaby,[86] they may be promoted to an even higher position (116).

Gender Roles in Gilead: The Case of Women

Unlike male groups, female groups are powerless, and their role in the Republic of Gilead basically responds to a single question: Are you fertile? Women become objects for the One to define and classify according to their ability or lack of ability to bear children. Those women who are infertile are classified according to other routine functions. The Commanders' Wives,[87] for instance, are the group of women married to the Commanders of the Faithful. Similar to male groups, female groups are color coded: Wives wear blue clothes, and they are at the top of female groups: "You don't see the Commanders' Wives on the sidewalks," Offred tells us, "only in cars" (24). Unlike their husbands, Wives do not work and spend most of their time either knitting, gardening or visiting other Wives. Most

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[86] Unbaby is the term used to refer to babies who are born with a deformity or abnormality. It is not clear whether or not these babies die due to those issues or are killed: "We didn't know exactly what would happen to the babies that didn't get passed, that were declared Unbabies. But we knew they were put somewhere, quickly, away" (113), Offred states.

[87] There are not many references to other Commanders' Wives except for Serena Joy. I am using her as a sample of other Wives, for as we have learned throughout the entire narrative, all groups of women are expected to behave the same way. In the Republic of Gilead, this applies to all male and female groups.

Wives are unable to bear children, so their role as Wives is to accept a Handmaid every two years, if they fail to fulfill their role, and to handle the domestic aspects of their homes. In the eyes of the Aunts and other women, the Wives are "defeated women" (46) for their inability to bear children.

While the Commanders rule their houses, "the garden is the domain of the Commander's Wife." Offred often sees Serena Joy in there and explains: "Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for" (12). Another activity for Wives is to sew or knit in their sitting rooms: "Perhaps she's sewing, in the sitting room, with her left foot on the footstool, because of her arthritis. Or knitting scarves, for the Angels at the front lines. . . . She doesn't bother with the cross-and-star pattern used by many of the other Wives, it's not a challenge. Fir trees march across the ends of her scarves, or eagles, or stiff humanoid figures, boy and girl, boy and girl." Offred somehow envies the Wives' gardening and knitting, for at least they have something to do with their time, even though Offred believes that "[m]aybe it's just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose" (13). The Wives are supposed to be motherly figures for the Handmaids, but this is not the case. Similar to the Aunts, they are allowed to hit them if it is necessary: "[T]here's Scriptural precedent. But not with any implement. Only with their hands." Offred never saw the Wife at her second posting, for she spent most of her time in her bedroom (16), and based on Offred's and Serena's first encounter, Serena will not be a motherly figure for her either: "I want to see as little of you as possible, she [Serena] said" (15).

The second group of women who are also unable to bear children are the Aunts. These women wear khaki uniforms with cattle prods at their waists. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Aunts are the women in charge of indoctrinating the Handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Center. Similar to the Wives, the Aunts are supposed to be motherly figures for the Handmaids, hence the name Aunts, but in reality, they are strict, manipulative, and even cruel to them. Besides teaching the Handmaids through speeches, testimonies, and documentaries, the Aunts make use of violence to punish/teach them a lesson. While the Commanders of the Faithful are in charge of the Ceremony and the Prayvaganzas (events that are considered positive by the citizens of Gilead for they are rituals of procreation and weddings),[88] the Aunts are in charge of Women's Salvagings and Particicutions that make use of physical violence and even murder as punishment for dissidents.

Both inside and outside the Rachel and Leah Center, the Aunts are capable of terrible things because they are true believers of the system and will do whatever it takes to make it prevail.[89] Besides the description of the Aunts wearing their cattle prods, which clearly symbolizes psychological violence, the Aunts physically punish those women who do not wish to "learn":

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[88] Even with these little details, men secure their reputation and position in Gilead.

[89] Let us not forget, once again, that the Aunts are powerless puppets of the totalitarian regime. They are able to manipulate the Handmaids because they have been previously manipulated.

> Yesterday Dolores wet the floor. Two Aunts hauled her away, a hand under each armpit. She wasn't there for the afternoon walk, but at night she was back in her usual bed. All night we could hear her moaning, off and on.
>
> What did they do to her? we whispered, from bed to bed.
>
> I don't know.
>
> Not knowing makes it worse. (72)

Offred does not offer an actual description of the punishment but the consequence of it. The fact that the other Handmaids do not know what the Aunts did to Dolores make it worse for them, for the possibilities are infinite. It is in another scene, now with Moira, that we learn about one of these violent methods of punishment.

When Moira is caught after her first failed attempt to escape the center, pretending to be sick and thus taken to the hospital, the Handmaids are witness, on purpose, to the actual physical consequence of trying to escape the Rachel and Leah Center: "They hauled Moira out, dragged her in through the gate and up the front steps, holding her under the armpits, one on each side. She was having trouble walking." Offred continues,

> They took her into the room that used to be the Science Lab. It was a room where none of us ever went willingly. Afterwards she could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen. It was the feet they'd do, for a first offense. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet or your hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential. (91)

This scene emphasizes two aspects. First, it is an extremely graphic lesson for the other Handmaids to learn: this or something worse will happen if you try to escape.[90] Second, the Handmaids are simply sexual objects with one specific function: breeding.

The Marthas are the group of women assigned to a household in order to do the domestic chores. They wear green clothes "with a bib apron over it and without the white wings and the veil." They only wear a veil when they go outside, "but nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha" (9), Offred notes. Nevertheless, the Marthas are a source of information, "unofficial news from house to house" (11). Offred also envies them; she longs for the kind of conversations that take place in kitchens, where the Marthas spend a lot of their time: "and we would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischiefs that our bodies, like unruly children, can get into. . . . Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts" (10-11). In spite of Offred's desire, she realizes that this will never happen because "[t]he Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us [Handmaids]" (11).

Even though the Marthas will take care of the baby (204), if there is one after all, their role in Gilead is not highly valued, as happens with other female groups, for their function is not related to procreation. The Marthas have to work really hard and prove themselves worthy of being kept; otherwise, they might face a terrible fate:

> As for us, the Handmaids and even the Marthas, we avoid illness. The Marthas don't want to be forced to retire, because who knows where they

[90] This evidences as well that the "choice" women make to become a Handmaid and have sex in order to procreate is simply an illusion.

> go? You don't see that many old women around anymore. . . . I remember Cora, earlier in the spring, staggering around even though she had the flu, holding on to the door frames when she thought no one was looking, being careful not to cough. A slight cold, she said when Serena asked her. (154-55)

The Marthas who are no longer useful for the regime will be sent to the Colonies, along with the rest of the Unwomen.

The lowest ranked category of women are the Econowives, which is a special group of women:

> There are other women with baskets . . . some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can. Sometimes there is a woman all in black, a widow. There used to be more of them, but they seem to be diminishing (24).

Offred sees these women mostly on the days she goes shopping or there is a ceremony that requires all Gilead's citizens to attend. These women do not fulfill a specific role in Gilead. They are called Econowives because they are extremely poor. On one of their walks, Offred and Ofglen encounter a funeral procession, and Offred remembers what Aunt Lydia once said: "Some day, when the times improve, no one will have to be an Econowife." The Econowives do not approve of the Handmaids' "favored" position: "Beneath her veil the first one scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the sidewalk. The Econowives do not like us" (44).

There is one more category for women: the Unwomen. Unwomen in the Republic of Gilead are literally non-women, considered less than human beings: “Imagine, said Aunt Lydia, wasting their time like that, when they should have been doing something useful. Back then, the Unwomen were always wasting time. They were encouraged to do it. The government gave them money to do that very thing” (118-19). Unwomen are women who in the previous era, for instance, had a job, were independent, and fought for their own rights, women who decided not to have children for any reason, women who were, in short, free to decide over their own lives, bodies and minds.

Under the new rules of the regime, these women are the worst: “Of course, some women believed there would be no future, they thought the world would explode. That was the excuse they used, says Aunt Lydia. They said there was no sense in breeding. Aunt Lydia’s nostrils narrow: such wickedness. They were lazy women, she says. They were sluts” (113). At present, these “Godless” women, as Aunt Lydia calls them, are either Handmaids who after their third post cannot bear any children, old women who are useless for the regime, or dissident women who “decide”[91] to go to the Colonies. Needless to say, women who become believers of the system learn to reject other women who are not or who are unable to fulfill their role, calling them traitors and treating them as such. These women are usually sent to the Colonies, where their only possible fate is death.

The threat of becoming an Unwoman and being sent to the Colonies is always present in the Handmaids’ minds; as seen before, propaganda’s greatest catalyst is fear. In a scene

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[91] The choice is of course an illusion, for most women will prefer to live under the regime’s rules than die in the Colonies.

inside the Rachel and Leah Center, Janine suffers a mental breakdown: "Hello, she [Janine] said, but not to me. My name's Janine. I'm your waitperson for this morning. Can I get you some coffee to begin with?" When she refuses to get dressed or even move, the rest of the women try to convince her to react before one of the Aunts finds her like this: "Moira took Janine by the shoulders and shook her. Snap out of it, Janine, she said roughly. And don't use that *word*" (216). Still in a state of trance, Moira tells Janine:

> They won't send you to the Infirmary, so don't even think about it, Moira said. They won't mess around with trying to cure you. They won't even bother to ship you to the Colonies. You go too far away and they just take you up to the Chemistry Lab and shoot you. Then they burn you up with the garbage, like an Unwoman. So forget it.
>
> I want to go home, Janine said. She began to cry. (216-17)

In another scene in the novel, when Offred is taken to her monthly doctor appointment, the doctor offers Offred his help; in other words, he is offering to have sex with her so she can get pregnant. Offred replies, "'It's too dangerous,' I say. 'No, I can't.' The penalty is death." The fear in her words goes beyond the sex act itself; she is more concerned about offending the doctor, for "[h]e could fake the tests, report me for cancer, for infertility, have me shipped off to the Colonies, with the Unwomen. None of this has been said, but the knowledge of his power hangs nevertheless in the air as he pats my thigh, withdrew himself behind the hanging sheet" (61). In both scenes, it is evident that the threat of becoming an Unwoman and being sent to the Colonies is the major source of fear for women in Gilead, but mostly for the Handmaids. All female groups live under this threat if

their function in the Republic of Gilead becomes obsolete or unnecessary. Needless to say, infertile, old, or rebel women end up in the Colonies.

Female Objectification: The Case of the Jezebels and the Handmaids

> Eva no quiere ser para Adán
> la paridora pagada con pan.
> Eva prefiere también parir,
> pero después escoger dónde ir.
> Por eso adquiere un semental
> y le da uso sin dudas normal.
> Eva cambió la señal.
>
> Silvio Rodríguez, "Eva"

There has always been a double standard regarding women's sexuality. "[T]he view that sexuality was bad for women and that only 'bad' women were sexual" limited female sexuality, for women were not able to define their own sexuality (Jackson and Scott 5). This hypocritical view, however, both in the real world and in the fictional world of the Republic of Gilead, is overlooked when it comes to prostitutes and the service they may provide for men. Based on the function their sexuality has, women have been divided in two opposing categories: the respectable madonna and the rebarbative whore (Jackson and Scott). Traditionally, men encourage women to make use of their sexuality but only if it is to satisfy men's sexual desires: the rebarbative whore. On the other hand, men also encourage women to be submissive, passive, silent, obedient, pure and nurturing to become the perfect wife and mother: the respectable madonna. The control of female sexuality is the clearest example of how women are objectified. In the Republic of Gilead, female sexuality

is controlled and used for the benefit of others, and there are two groups of women who embody this in the novel: the Jezebels (the rebarbative whores) and the Handmaids (the respectable madonnas).

The Rebarbative Whores: The Case of the Jezebels

> They call you Jezebel
> Whenever we walk in
> You're going straight to hell
> For wanton acts of sin
>
> Martin Gore, "Jezebel"

The existence of the underground club Jezebel's in the Republic of Gilead evidences the double standard regarding women's sexuality. In the book of Kings, Jezebel, the pagan queen of Israel, interfered "with the exclusive worship of the Hebrew god Yahweh, disregarding the rights of the common man, and defying the great prophets Elijah and Elisha, [provoking] the internecine strife that enfeebled Israel for decades" ("Jezebel" *Britannica*). In addition to the Biblical allusion, Jezebel "has come to be known as an archetype of the wicked woman" ("Jezebel" *Britannica*) and "as the representative of all that is designing, crafty, malicious, revengeful, and cruel" ("Jezebel" *Easton's*).

In the novel, the name Jezebel refers to both the women who are forced to work in Gilead's underground brothel and the brothel's name. Jezebels are considered dissidents for they refuse to become Handmaids or are simply not able to convert in the Rachel and Leah Center, such as what happens to Moira. The first reference to the name Jezebel in the novel occurs in one of Offred's memories from the Rachel and Leah Center. The Aunts refer

to women who did not want to have children in the time before as Jezebels: “Some did it themselves, had themselves tied shut with catgut or scarred with chemicals. How could they, said Aunt Lydia, oh how could they have done such a thing? Jezebels! Scorning God’s gifts!” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 112). The names Unwoman and Jezebel sometimes overlap in the novel, for both categories refer to women who do not want to (or cannot) have children.

The actual Jezebels in the novel then are those women, including Moira, who Offred sees when the Commander takes her to the club. In order to blend in, the Commander asks Offred to put on a disguise: “He’s holding a handful, it seems, of feathers, mauve and pink. Now he shakes this out. It’s a garment, apparently, and for a woman: there are the cups for the breasts, covered in purple sequins. The sequins are tiny stars. The feathers are around the thigh holes, and along the top” (230). In addition to the disguise, the Commander also asks Offred to put on some make-up in order to look like one of them (231). For one night, Offred becomes a Jezebel, a prostitute.

Once in the club, Offred realizes the place used to be a hotel but it is now full of women:

> The women are sitting, lounging, strolling, leaning against one another. There are men mingled with them, a lot of men, but in their dark uniforms or suits, so similar to one another, they form only a kind of background. The women on the other hand are tropical, they are dressed in all kinds of bright festive gear. Some of them have on outfits like mine, feathers and glister, cut high up the thighs, low over the breasts. Some are in olden-days lingerie,

> shortie nightgowns, baby-doll pajamas, the occasional see-through negligee. Some are in bathing suits, one piece or bikini; one, I see, is wearing a crocheted affair, with big scallop shells covering the tits. Some are in jogging shorts and sun halters, some in exercise costumes like the ones they used to show on television, body-tight, with knitted pastel leg warmers. There are even a few in cheerleaders' outfits, little pleated skirts, outsized letters across the chest. I guess they've had to fall back on a mélange, whatever they could scrounge or salvage. (234-35)

These tropical women, as Offred calls them, similar to the other groups of women, are forced to adopt new identities, represented by the multiple disguises they wear. All these costumes have a sexual connotation and they stand for the ultimate means of women's objectification. They are there to provide a sexual service to the men in Gilead and outside of it.

Offred learns that Jezebel's is mainly used for business and political reasons: "The men are not homogeneous, as I first thought. Over by the fountain there's a group of Japanese, in lightish-gray suits, and in the far corner there's a splash of white: Arabs, in those long bathrobes they wear, the headgear, the striped sweat-bands" (236). The Commander further adds,

> "It's only for officers," he says. "From all branches; and senior officials. And trade delegations, of course. It stimulates trade. It's a good place to meet people. You can hardly do business without it. We try to provide at least as good as they can get elsewhere. You can overhear things too; information.

> A man will sometimes tell a woman things he wouldn't tell another man." (237)

Jezebel's symbolizes what power can do in a society where men are in control of most aspects of a woman's life, particularly her sexuality. Sadly, these women are not that different from the other groups of women in Gilead, for they are used and treated as voiceless, invisible objects and are led to believe that they made that choice. As I have mentioned before, choices in the Republic of Gilead are but an illusion.

The Commander tells Offred that the reason for the club to exist is "nature": "'Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan.' . . . 'Women know that instinctively. Why did they buy so many different clothes, in the old days? To trick the men into thinking they were several different women. A new one each day'" (217). As discussed before, one of the reasons that support patriarchal structures is the discourse of biology. The belief that nature dictates that men need variety is one example of this thought. In other words, the Commander is justifying the existence of Jezebel's because of biological reasons. In the words of the Commander, "It solves a lot of problems" (237). As a matter of fact, this is all an excuse, a façade, so men can freely enjoy their sexuality while women's sexuality is under strict control.

Offred learns that some of the women in the club are "real pros. Working girls . . . from the time before" who "couldn't be assimilated" while some others are women who in the time before were professionals: "That one there, the one in green, she's a sociologist. Or was. That one was a lawyer, that one was in business, an executive position; some sort

of fast-food chain or maybe it was hotels" (237-38).[92] According to the Commander, all these women "prefer it here. . . . To the alternatives" (238). The choice these women make, I cannot emphasize this point enough, is simply an illusion, for they are forced to accept this role if they cannot be a Handmaid, or to become an Unwoman and be sent to the Colonies.

The Respectable Madonnas: The Case of the Handmaids

Once outside the Rachel and Leah Center, the Handmaids are expected to behave like the respectable madonnas. Their primary role in this totalitarian regime is to procreate; they become exclusively vessels for reproduction. Every two years, the Handmaids are assigned to a different Commander's house. If they succeed in their role, that is, if they are able to become pregnant, the Handmaids will have to give up the baby so that the Commander's Wife can raise her/him, and then they will be transferred to a new house to see if they can get pregnant again. The reward for the Handmaids who succeed in their role and are able to give birth to a healthy child is that they will "never be sent to the Colonies" and they will "never be declared Unwoman" (127).

To become pregnant is thus the Handmaids' only path to salvation. Offred and the other Handmaids, on one of their shopping days, encounter Ofwarren (Janine), the only woman who at present is pregnant in Gilead:

[92] This scene reminds me of Joanna Eberhart's shocking realization in *The Stepford Wives by Ira Levin.* She discovers that the women in Stepford used to be independent women and interested in feminism before they were turned into the robot-like creatures who become "perfect" housewives. Unlike Offred, unfortunately, Joanna is not able to escape from this living nightmare nor let her voice be heard.

> One of them is vastly pregnant; her belly, under her loose garment, swells triumphantly. There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; despite ourselves we turn our heads, blatantly, to see better; our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved.
>
> The women in the room are whispering, almost talking, so great is their excitement. (26)

The Handmaids' only hope is to become pregnant so they can survive. If they succeed, they will never be sent to the Colonies and the fear of facing a terrible death will finally disappear, or at least that is what they need to believe.

For the Handmaids to get pregnant, they have to go through the Ceremony every month. The Ceremony is a sex ritual, an impregnation ritual. The night of the Ceremony, everyone who is part of the household, that is, the Commander, the Commander's Wife, the Marthas, the main Guardian, and the Handmaid, is required to attend a pre-ceremony ritual: "[T]hey all need to be here, the Ceremony demands it. We are obliged to sit through this, one way or another" (81). Let us not forget that at any point, any woman can be reclassified: "I could become an Unwoman" (136), Offred accepts. During the pre-ceremony, the Commander reads some Biblical passages, as we have seen before, and then everyone prays silently for the Ceremony to be successful (90). After this, the Marthas and the Guardian are dismissed while the Commander, the Wife and the Handmaid go to the bedroom to complete the Ceremony. "The Ceremony goes as usual" (93), Offred states.

The description she gives about the ritual is extremely impersonal because in her eyes, everyone is just doing their job. She starts by describing the position each person adopts: "I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers" (93). While Offred lies on her back, Serena Joy is above her:

> Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thigh on either side of me. She too is fully clothed.
>
> My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. (93-94)

The Commander, on the other hand, lies below her so he can complete his task:

> Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. (94)

Sex is no longer pleasurable; on the contrary, it is highly impersonal for there is no seduction, least of all love, as Offred states. In Gilead sex is a task, a sacrifice, a responsibility for the benefit of all: a means to reach an end. It is hard for Offred to name or define what the act really is for she is not even sure what it is. Although Offred states that the act is not rape for she "chose" it, she, like the rest of the Handmaids, are all victims

of rape, disguised, as many other acts in Gilead, as an act of sacrifice and salvation. If the Handmaids were in control of the sexual act, the circumstances, and the possible result, then it would not be called rape; this is definitely not the case. Offred detaches herself from the act because clearly she does not want to be there when it happens, for she is just an object: “One detaches oneself. One describes” (95), she concludes.

In addition to being victims of rape, the Handmaids are victims of public display and humiliation during the ritual of Birth. Birth Day is a day of excitement for everyone in Gilead, especially for the Handmaids, for it means their sacrifice has real, tangible results. Ofwarren (Janine) is in labor. As for other rituals in Gilead, attendance is mandatory, except for the Commanders. The humiliation is similar to that of the Ceremony, the Wives get ready as if they were the ones about to give birth: “A small thin woman, she lies on the floor, in a white cotton nightgown, her graying hair spreading like mildew over the rug; they massage her tiny belly, just as if she’s really about to give birth herself” (116). The Birthing Stool has a double seat: one for the Handmaid, one for the Wife, which is “raised like a throne behind the other” (117). The privileged positions, let us not forget, are for those with power. In the eyes of Offred, Janine resembles a doll, one that has been damaged: “Crouching like that, she’s like a doll, an old one that’s been pillaged and discarded, in some corner, akimbo” (124).

When the baby is finally born, “The two Wives in blue help the third Wife, the Wife of the household, down from the Birthing Stool and over to the bed, where they lay her down and tuck her in. The baby, washed now and quiet, is placed ceremoniously in her arms” (126). Janine, on the other hand, keeps crying out of pain, both physical and

emotional pain: "[S]he's crying helplessly, burnt-out miserable tears." After all the sacrifice, Janine will simply be taken to another house "to see if she can do it again" (127) while the Wife will keep the baby, "something she's won, a tribute" (126). In the end, it was all in vain, for the baby is later declared an Unbaby: "'It was no good, you know,' Ofglen says near the side of my head. 'It was a shredder after all'" (214), which leads Janine to finally lose her sanity.

On the surface, the Republic of Gilead might be mistaken for a matriarchy, for it resembles a women-only world. Nevertheless, this is simply a disguise, a make-believe world, for the reality is quite another. Male groups rule this society, and even though these male groups are classified and are under the command of superior groups, those are also ruled by men. Put simply, in Gilead all men enjoy a better position than women because they are not objectified as women are. There are three specific scenes where Offred addresses the make-believe matriarchy topic. In the first scene Offred addresses her mother in an imaginary conversation: "Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists" (127). Offred's mother was a fervent activist who in the time before fought for women's rights. Offred says this after Birth Day is over—the only one that happens while Offred is in Gilead—where all the women in the Republic of Gilead are meant to attend while the men are expected to be absent.

In the second scene, Aunt Lydia is telling the Handmaids what it will be like for the future generations:

> The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them, and when the population level is up to scratch again we'll no longer have to transfer you from one house to another because there will be enough to go round. There can be bonds of real affection, she said, blinking at us ingratiatingly, under such conditions. Women united for a common end! (162)

This idyllic vision of a woman's culture is by all means a lie; they want women to believe that the ideal women-only world "will provide women with full access to the range of experiences and emotions associated with humanity" (Merrick 248). However, a society that objectifies women and separates women and men will never be an ideal society. Gilead is indeed a "dystopian vision, [with] role reversals and worlds which split men and women into separate societies" (Merrick 249).

The third and last scene is a memory Offred has about a conversation she had in the past with Moira. After arguing about Moira's belief that being in a relationship with a woman was different "because the balance of power was equal between women," Offred tells her: "I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away, I said. You couldn't just ignore them" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 172). Foreshadowing what was to happen to women in Gilead, this conversation is a direct critique of the idea of creating a women-only world.

Where, then, does this gender inequality come from? It comes from a deep-rooted religious discourse found in patriarchal societies, with discriminatory practices towards

women as the direct result of a system of power that is dominated by men. Gender roles are defined based on a hierarchy that favors men's position. In the Republic of Gilead, women are expected to fulfill a role that involves the deprivation of their own bodies and voices in order to become objects of sexual pleasure and motherhood. Women have virtually no other option than to accept this, for rejection will result in their death. As Lefanu reminds us, feminist dystopias describe "the denial of women's sexual autonomy . . . women are trapped by their sex, by their femaleness, and reduced from subjecthood to function" (qtd. in Mohr 36).

CHAPTER V:
SURVIVING DYSTOPIA: STORYTELLING AND SUBJECTIVITY IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

> Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.
>
> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Female Subjectivity: Choice or Illusion?

Before the Republic of Gilead, before devastation and infertility, forced roles and rituals, and imposed identities, Offred lives what looks like a normal life. The narration of Offred's story starts when Offred and other Handmaids are already at the Rachel and Leah Center; however, the past has not been entirely erased from their memories, and the protagonist resorts to those memories in order not to forget what her life was like and the people who were part of it. This holding on to the past is one of the several aspects that help Offred reconstruct her new self, her subjectivity. From her life "in the time before," as the past is referred to in the novel, we become familiarized with Offred's different facets: Offred as a child and daughter, Offred as a college student and worker, and Offred as a wife and mother.

In the first facet, Offred as a child and daughter, we learn about Offred's mother and her decision to have a child. In an attempt to keep her alive and try to understand her motives, Offred recalls the moment her mother explains her choice of becoming a mother:

> I had you when I was thirty-seven, my mother said. It was a risk, you could have been deformed or something. You were a wanted child, all right, and

> did I get shit from some quarters! . . . But when I was six months' pregnant, a lot of them started sending me these articles about how the birth-defect rate went zooming up after thirty-five. Just what I needed. And stuff about how hard it was to be a single parent. Fuck that shit, I told them, I've started this and I'm going to finish it. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 120)

Offred's mother's determination to have a child by herself is evidenced in this section. Even more significant is the emphasis she gives to having made a choice, a choice most of her friends condemn. The choice of becoming a mother and having control over one's body, what Offred's mother fights for in the time before, is nonexistent in the Republic of Gilead.

As a child, unfortunately, Offred's mother's actions and behavior are not fully understood by the young child, so Offred resents her. For instance, Offred resents her feminist activism and friends, for they seem more important than spending time with her daughter: "But there were some women burning books, that's what she was really there for. To see her friends; she'd lied to me, Saturdays were supposed to be my day. I turned away from her, sulking, towards the ducks, but the fire drew me back" (38). The description of the day as "cold" and "gray" reflects the way Offred feels about her mother. Their relationship, as evidenced in the text, is complicated because not even as an adult is Offred able to completely understand the importance of her mother's actions.[93] For Offred, the child, her mother has disappointed her; she is not the ideal, stay-at-home mother that Offred wishes to have: "Part of my disapproval was that . . . perfunctory, routine. But also

[93] Offred is finally able to understand the relevance of her mother's actions once she is trapped in Gilead.

I wanted from her a life more ceremonious, less subject to makeshift and decampment" (181). As a child, all that Offred wants is to have a regular mother, one that would bake bread, for instance, or one that would enjoy staying at home taking care of her instead of working. At the kitchen in the Commander's house, a memory strikes Offred: "The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread" (47).

Besides memories, Offred also has dreams about her past. In one of them, she remembers her mother taking care of her while sick; the dream, however, emphasizes her mother's obligation in taking care of her: "I'm back in this bed, trying to wake up, and I wake up and sit on the edge of the bed, and my mother comes in with a tray and asks me if I'm feeling better. When I was sick, as a child, she *had to* stay home from work" (109; emphasis added). Both scenes evoke a feeling of nostalgia for now that Offred does not have her mother anymore, she longs for her: "Back on the earth, my mother is part of the crowd now, and I can't see her anymore" (120). After watching her mother in one of the documentaries about Unwomen the Aunts used to show the Handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Center, Offred asserts, very symbolically, that she can no longer see her mother.

Offred remembers a fight she once had with her mother and finally acknowledges and understands her mother's actions:

> I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms. I didn't want to be the model offspring, the incarnation

> of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once.
>
> I want her back. I want everything back, the way it was. But there is no point to it, this wanting. (122)

Now that all Offred's mother fought for in the time before is lost, Offred is finally able to recognize the value of her mother's life's work. Even though Offred admits the differences between her ideals and her mother's, Offred's desire to have her back is her way of acknowledging her mother's struggle. When Offred is forced to give up her family, body, and identity for the benefit of all in Gilead, she finally comes to terms with her mother and understands her: "No mother is ever, completely, a child's idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well. But despite everything, we didn't do badly by one another, we did as well as most. I wish she were here, so I could tell her I finally know this" (181).

As a college student and worker, the second facet, Offred is a young, mature, and independent woman. The most important feature of Offred while in college is her desire for knowledge. Offred behaves like the typical responsible student. After Moira's request to "go for a beer," Offred tells her that she first needs to finish a paper: "What was it? Psychology, English, economics. We studied things like that, then. On the floor of the room there were books, open face down, this way and that, extravagantly" (37-38). Offred has trouble remembering the subject of her paper; she is starting to forget certain aspects of her life in the time before. Nevertheless, her craving for knowledge, even though forbidden, never disappears, not even in Gilead. After college, Offred decides to start

working and to move out to a new apartment while she waits for "Luke [to] pry himself loose." Her job, at a local library, consists of "transferring books to computer discs." Even though the books were "supposed to go to the shredder," Offred "sometimes took them home with [her]" (173). Offred's craving for knowledge, which is one of the aspects she is forced to give up in Gilead, gives her power.

Offred refers to the idea of having a job as something "strange": "All those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing" (173). Offred loses part of her autonomy as a woman when she loses her job unexpectedly and all her money is transferred to her husband: "They've frozen them [bank accounts], she [Moira] said. . . . Any account with an F on it instead of an M. All they needed to do is push a few buttons. We're cut off. . . . Women can't hold property anymore, she said. It's a new law. . . . Luke can use your Compucount for you, she said" (178). Offred becomes an object for the government (and her husband to some extent) to control. "You [Luke] don't know what it's like, I said. I feel as if somebody cut off my feet. I wasn't crying. Also, I couldn't put my arms around him" (179). Offred rejects Luke for what she is experiencing because she cannot understand why men are doing this to her. After this, Offred stays at home: "I started doing more housework, more baking . . . [and sitting] beside the bedroom window, staring out" (180). Even before Gilead, Offred is being trained to fulfill her intended and only accepted role in the future. Men now hold the power to subject women completely, for now women lack the means to survive financially without them.

The last facet of Offred’s previous life is her role as a wife and mother. Before becoming Luke’s wife, Offred is, for an unknown period, Luke’s mistress. When he divorces his former wife, Luke and Offred get married and have one daughter. Offred recalls how once she and Luke dreamed about being a family:

> Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets. We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up. We would have a garden, swings for the children. We would have children. Although we knew it wasn’t too likely we could ever afford it, it was something to talk about, a game for Sundays. Such freedom now seems almost weightless. (23-24)

In Offred’s previous life she had the possibility of dreaming about a future that at present is lost. Her dream was like many other women’s dream: to get married and have children. Her marriage to Luke seems to be a good one and her love and devotion to him haunts her even after years. “How were we to know we were happy?” (51), Offred wonders.

In the form of dreams, ghosts, and smells, Offred’s daughter makes her appearances from the past. There are but a few memories of Offred’s daughter as someone who is alive. Most of the memories Offred has of her daughter are related to the idea of almost losing her or actually losing her. In a scene in their kitchen, Offred and Luke are fighting over the amount of plastic bags Offred keeps under the sink: “She [the daughter] could get one of those over her head, he’d say. You know how kids like to play. She never would, I’d say. She’s too old. (Or too smart, or too lucky.) But I would feel a chill of fear, and then guilt for having been so careless. It was true, I took too much for granted; I trusted

fate, back then" (27). Offred feels responsible for being careless and for trusting fate in the time before. In another scene at the supermarket, "when she [Offred's daughter] was eleven months old, a woman stole her out of a supermarket cart" (63). The scene foreshadows Offred's daughter's disappearance in the future and the desperation of the women in Gilead to have children:

> I heard her start to cry. I turned around and she was disappearing down the aisle, in the arms of a woman I'd never seen before. I screamed, and the woman was stopped. She must have been about thirty-five. She was crying and saying it was her baby, the Lord had given it to her, he'd sent her a sign. I felt sorry for her. The store manager apologized and they held her until the police came. (63-64)

The incident, as Offred learns later, was not isolated (64).

The last recollection Offred has of herself with her daughter is their failed attempt to escape to Canada. The main reason they were escaping was that her marriage was not "lawful, under the law" (224) because this was Luke's second marriage. The day they try to escape, Offred gives her daughter a pill "so she'll be asleep when [they] cross. That way she won't betray [them]. You can't expect a child to lie convincingly" (85). Luke and Offred, on the other hand, are forced to lie to her; they tell her that they were going on a picnic, for they "didn't want to lay upon her the burden of [their] truth" (84). The last thing she remembers about the escape is being separated from her daughter:

> She's too young, it's too late, we come apart, my arms are held, and the edges go dark and nothing is left but a little window, a very little window,

> like the wrong end of a telescope, like the window on a Christmas card, an old one, night and ice outside, and within a candle, a shining tree, a family, I can hear the bells even, sleigh bells, from the radio, old music, but through this window I can see, small but very clear, I can see her, going away from me, through the trees which are already turning, red and yellow, holding out her arms to me, being carried away. (75)

After this, Offred sees her once in a photograph which Serena shows to her: "So tall and changed. Smiling a little now, so soon, and in her white dress as if for an olden-days First Communion" (228). Offred's daughter has become a Daughter in the Republic of Gilead; eventually she will be given to an Angel for marriage. After this, Offred never sees her daughter again.

Offred's memories as a mother are the most painful ones, for she desperately tries to hold on to her daughter's image: "I remember the pictures of us I once had, me holding her, standard poses, mother and baby, locked in a frame, for safety." Offred's major concern and affliction is that her daughter has already forgotten her: "Do I exist for her? Am I a picture somewhere, in the dark at the back of her mind?" (64). In Gilead, Offred is not only forced to give up her child but also to give up any other potential child she may have. Ironically, motherhood is the most valuable role in Gilead; however, those who become mothers are not able to keep their own children. Offred has entirely lost her role as mother, for she will never be one again as long as she remains in Gilead.

All of these facets, Offred as a child and daughter, Offred as a college student and worker, Offred as a wife and mother, and many others, such as Offred as an autonomous

subject, constitute Offred's identity in the time before. The way Offred defines herself and the way she is defined by others in the time before are influenced by the conditions she lives in. Offred is not able to see the relevance of her mother's activist actions because she takes for granted the rights she has. Similarly, her autonomy, independence, and right to work are aspects from her life which Offred enjoys without realizing the power they connote. At present, her marriage to Luke is considered illegitimate and hence Offred and her daughter are forced to adopt new roles. However, it is after these identities are replaced by functions and roles in the Republic of Gilead that Offred realizes the need to reject those which are imposed, and in a sense, to analyze those she had in the time before.

At present, in the Republic of Gilead, Offred no longer uses her real name from her previous life; she becomes nameless: "I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden" (84). Her new identification depends on whose Commander's house she is sent to: "This is how you can get lost, in a sea of names" (283), Offred states. In her third post, the one she narrates in the novel, she is sent to Commander Fred's house, so her name becomes Offred (of - Fred). Her new name reflects possession; for the period of two years, she belongs to Commander Fred. Offred has not lost the hope, however, that she will one day use her own name again: "I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day" (84).

Offred has lost any trace of what constituted her identity in the time before. She is no longer a mother, daughter, friend, or woman. For Gilead's purposes, she, as well as the

other Handmaids, are simply "two-legged wombs . . . sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (136) who are easily recognized by their red habit and tattooed ankles: "Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource" (65). When the Commander takes Offred to Jezebel's, Offred narrates the way the Commander touches her ankle: "He stops at the foot, his fingers encircling the ankle, briefly, like a bracelet, where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership" (254).

Whenever Offred sees herself in a mirror or the like, she sees a distorted image of what she is now: "I go up the stairs, my face, distant and white and distorted, framed in the hall mirror, which bulges outward like an eye under pressure" (49). Offred does not recognize herself in this image, but she does recognize that she is trapped by a frame, the same way she is trapped in Gilead. Moreover, Offred is aware her sex is what most defines her now: "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (63). She understands her body is no longer "an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of [her] will. . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently" (73). Offred is no longer in the possession of her own body. Offred's new identity and roles in the Republic of Gilead are but an illusion, an illusion created by a patriarchal, theocratic state that wants their women nameless, objectified, and silent: "From the point of view of future history, this kind, we'll be invisible" (228). Gilead's regime forces Offred to accept her new identity; nevertheless, since her current

identity and role in Gilead are but an illusion created by the patriarchal state, Offred has a chance to resist them and construct a subjectivity of her own. As I will analyze later, Offred achieves this by means of her narration.

Resistance: Surviving Dystopia

Although it is true that the formation of subjectivities is never fixed, for individuals constantly change and make different choices, those who are defined as the *other* in a patriarchal and totalitarian society find it extremely difficult to define and be aware of their true selves. There are certain female characters in the novel who at first sight seem to have some kind of power and control over their lives, both in the time before and in Gilead. Nevertheless, in the words of Lawrence W. Friedman, choices have limitations and identities become illusions because of the different forces that work on the construction of identities (qtd. in Hall 2). These female characters are also prisoners of the patriarchal system they live in, but unlike Offred, they are never able to escape from it. The slogan "Gilead is within you" has a clear connotation: the patriarchal regime obliterates these women's subjectivities and makes them believe they are the ones who choose how to be and act.

In the time before, Serena Joy, Commander Fred's Wife, was part of a religious television show. Offred remembers seeing her on "the Growing Souls Gospel Hour, where they would tell Bible stories for children and sing hymns" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 16). What she remembers the most, besides her physical appearance, is her strong presence on screen:

> One of the women was called Serena Joy. She was the lead soprano. She was ash blond, petite, with a snub nose and huge blue eyes which she'd turn upwards during hymns. She could smile and cry at the same time, one tear or two sliding gracefully down her cheek, as if on cue, as her voice lifted through its highest notes, tremulous, effortless. It was after that she went on to other things.
>
> The woman sitting in front of me was Serena Joy. Or had been, once. So it was worse than I thought. (16)

Offred realizes her situation in her new post is risky; she has to be extra careful in front of this woman because Serena Joy is a true religious fanatic and a true believer of the system. In the time before, Offred recalls, Serena made speeches advocating for "the sanctity of the home."

Serena had a voice in the time before, and her voice was heard: "She wasn't singing anymore by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all" (45). Serena's prophetic speeches become her reality in Gilead. She becomes a Commander's Wife and stays at home for the good of all; however, this time the sacrifice she has to make is bigger than she ever imagined: she loses her voice, name, and identity. The woman Offred was once impressed by as a child is now lost in a blue habit, a childless house, and a garden.

Serena has become voiceless; like the rest of women in Gilead, her right to speak has been taken away: “She doesn’t make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word” (46). Ironically, now Serena Joy is miserable and trapped in what she thought she wanted. The day Offred and Serena meet, she tells Offred: “As for my husband, she said, he’s just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Till death do us apart. It’s final.” Then she adds, “It’s one of the things we fought for . . . and suddenly she wasn’t looking at me, she was looking down at her knuckled, diamond-studded hands . . . ” (16). It is unfortunately too late for Serena to realize the mistake she has made. She got exactly what she preached for: a marriage and the possibility to stay at home. The problem is that being in that position prevents her from developing as an individual; she is a prisoner in her own home, in her own garden. Serena wanted a utopia, but as we have seen before, utopias are never real; they are but illusions of unreachable ideal societies. Thus, Serena, without any other option, has been also forced to completely embrace the system.

In the time before, Serena chooses to define herself as Serena Joy, which was not her real name. Offred calls the name “stupid” and criticizes Serena’s choice: “With everything to choose from in the way of names, why did she pick that one? Serena Joy was never her real name, not even then. Her real name was Pam” (45). Now that all women in Gilead lack names, naming becomes highly significant in the novel. At present, neither Pam nor Serena Joy defines this person that has become the Commander’s Wife. She has become not only voiceless but also nameless. Even though Offred envies certain aspects of

Serena Joy's life, her garden and access to the black market, for instance, Offred is not intimidated by her position because unlike Offred's, Serena Joy's position is static: she is never able to escape from the prison that her home and garden stand for.

As I previously mentioned, naming is extremely important in the novel, and in the case of Serena and Moira, their names have a symbolic meaning in classical mythology. According to Pierre Grimal, the *Ceres* and the *Moiras*[94] are the personification of Destiny; they are sisters. Nevertheless, while the *Moiras* are portrayed positively, The *Ceres* have a strong negative and violent connotation (364). The *Ceres* are usually portrayed as black, winged creatures, with horrible white teeth, and long, sharp nails. These creatures tear corpses apart and drink the blood of those who are dead or hurt. Moreover, Plato believed these perverse creatures sully everything they touch in a person's life (Grimal 98).

Like the *Ceres*, Serena's fate is bound to Offred's own fate because in Gilead Wives and Handmaids are supposed to become a unit, as evidenced in the way Serena grabs her and places her in between her legs during the ritual of the Ceremony. Moreover, Serena, at some points in the novel, manipulates Offred's destiny. When she asks Offred to have sex with Nick so that she can increase the chances of becoming pregnant, Serena rewards Offred with a cigarette and the promise of a picture of her daughter. Offred becomes enraged for she cannot believe Serena knew where her daughter was and did not tell her: "She knows where they've put her then, where they're keeping her. She's known all along. Something chokes in my throat. The bitch, not to tell me, bring me news, any news at all"

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[94] I will refer to the *Moiras* later.

(Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 206). Serena is demonstrating her power to Offred —even if it is limited. Serena's cruel and manipulative tactics resemble, in a less grotesque and violent way than the *Ceres*, what she is willing do to get what she wants.[95]

Gradually, Offred's reconstruction of her past begins to help her understand her own life and self, both in the past and in the present. While remembering Serena Joy, she realizes now something she ignored in the past: "*We* thought she was funny. Or Luke thought she was funny. *I* only pretended to think so. Really she was a little frightening. She was in *earnest*" (46; emphasis added). Serena's speeches were not a threat to Offred in the past. As with other aspects of her life, Offred took many things for granted, and now she realizes it. At that time, she would have never thought that Serena's words were going to be part of her future. Now that her present situation has changed, Offred starts changing as well, and one of the major changes is that she no longer speaks of "we" (in the sense of collectivity) but of "I"; Offred is individualizing herself from others. She is coming to terms with her true self. Unlike Serena, Offred learns that her survival depends on her ability to resist the regime, for even the smallest act of resistance represents a threat to it.

Offred's mother's role in the novel serves to contrast Serena Joy's role. While Serena Joy advocates for the sanctity of the home and mirrors the Right-Wing movement, Offred's mother advocates for women's rights, representing the feminist movement in the United States in the 1970s-early 1980s. As a feminist activist in the time before, Offred's mother actively fights for women's sexual rights, including access to abortion and the

[95] It is not my intention, though, to pass judgment on Serena Joy's actions; she, like the rest of women in the Republic of Gilead, is trying to survive and acts according to what she is made to believe.

freedom to control their own bodies: “Behind this sign there are other signs, and the camera notices them briefly: FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN’S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE? Under the last sign there’s a line drawing of a woman’s body, lying on a table, blood dripping out of it” (120). Offred’s mother spends her days at these protests; in one of the Unwomen documentaries shown to the Handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Center, as seen before, Offred sees her mother at one of these marches: “First come the title and some names, blacked out on the film with a crayon so we can’t read them, and then I see my mother. My young mother . . . I’ve forgotten my mother was once as pretty and as *earnest* as that” (119; emphasis added). Like Serena, Offred’s mother is passionate in what she believes.

Offred’s mother also tries to make her daughter understand the importance of women’s rights. Unfortunately, like the classic *raisonneur* in comedy, Offred’s mother fails miserably to make Offred see what the reality for women was really like. As an old woman, she would reproach—usually after a few drinks and harshly—Offred’s lack of action:

> As for you, she’d say to me, you’re just a backlash. Flash in the pan. History will absolve me.
>
> But she wouldn’t say things like that until after the third drink. You young people don’t appreciate things, she’d say. You don’t know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at him [Luke], slicing up the carrots. Don’t you know how many women's lives, how many women’s *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far? (121)

Without understanding her mother's frustration, Offred tells her mother that they should "not get into an argument about nothing" (121). Her mother simply states: "You don't understand, do you. You don't understand at all what I'm talking about" (121-22).

Unfortunately for Offred's mother, her old age and ideals are an impediment for Gilead's success. A lifetime of struggling against patriarchal oppression is futile once the Republic of Gilead is established. Offred's mother, the nameless mother who actually fought for not only hers but other women's sexual rights, is silenced by the regime, defined as an Unwoman, and sentenced to experience a horrible death in the Colonies. When Offred sees Moira at Jezebel's, Moira tells her she saw her mother:

> Not in person, it was in that film they showed us, about the Colonies. There was a close-up, it was her all right. She was wrapped up in one of those gray things but I know it was her.
>
> Thank God, I said.
>
> Why, thank God? said Moira.
>
> I thought she was dead.
>
> She might as well be, said Moira. You should wish it for her. (252)

Like Serena Joy, Offred's mother becomes a prisoner of a system she is no longer able to escape from. Foreshadowing her own future, not her daughter's as she once thought, the words she tells Offred in anger are actually meant for herself: history will absolve her, for unlike her mother, Offred's voice resists and survives this totalitarian system.

Like Offred's mother, Moira is strong, independent, clever and defiant. According to Pierre Grimal, the *Moiras* in classical mythology influence other people's destinies, and

they are one of the fundamental forces in the world, becoming a part of people's lives from beginning to end and in both happy and sorrowful times. In addition, since the *Moiras* are the personification of human destiny, they determine a person's life span; they are powerful, and their laws cannot be transgressed (364). Moira is Offred's best friend and an important part in Offred's life both in the time before and in the Republic of Gilead. Moira becomes a major influence in Offred's fate, particularly after their encounter at Jezebel's, as I will analyze later.

Offred truly admires Moira's personality and courage, and there are some specific moments in which she wishes to be like her: "They've given me a small electric fan, which helps in this humidity. It whirs on the floor, in the corner, its blades encased in grille-work. If I were Moira, I'd know how to take it apart, reduce it to its cutting edges. I have no screwdriver, but if I were Moira I could do it without a screwdriver. I'm not Moira" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 171). When Moira is brought to the Rachel and Leah Center, Offred states that having Moira there makes her feel "safer" and "ridiculously happy" (71). Unlike the rest of the female characters in the novel, Moira does not lose her name, her identity, for even though she is being trained in the Rachel and Leah Center along with the rest of the Handmaids, she refuses to adopt this role and is determined to escape from the center, which she does, not once but two different times.

In Moira's first attempt to escape, she makes herself sick and is taken to the hospital: "I've got to get out of here, I'm going bats" (89), Moira tells Offred in one of their conversations through the bathroom's walls. Moira fails, though, and she is almost immediately brought back to the center: "I saw the ambulance come back, no siren this

time. One of the Angels jumped out, talked with the guard. . . . They hauled Moira out, dragged her in through the gate and up the front steps, holding her under the armpits, one on each side. She was having trouble walking." After this, the Aunts punish Moira; they torture her: "It's the feet they'd do, for a first offense. . . . After that the hands" (91). Despite this, neither the Aunts nor the system breaks Moira's spirit, and she succeeds in escaping the center on her second attempt. She dismantles the inside of one of the toilets and with the lever she has taken out she threatens Aunt Elizabeth, who after this is tied up with Moira's veil. Moira takes Aunt Elizabeth's habit and simply walks right through the door of the center (130-32).

After this, Moira becomes a symbol of power and freedom for the rest of the Handmaids: "Moira had power now, she's been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman" (133). Moira's escape through the Underground Femaleroad opens a possibility the other Handmaids thought inexistent until this point; they can escape from the center as well:

> Moira was our fantasy. . . . In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked.
>
> We expected her to be dragged in at any minute, as she had been before. We could not imagine what they might do to her this time. It would be very bad, whatever it was.
>
> But nothing happened. Moira didn't reappear. She hasn't yet. (133)

After being trapped and indoctrinated in the center, these women have already lost the hope for freedom. Moira becomes their reminder that they too can escape, that the Aunts can be defeated, that their freedom can be reached. Unfortunately, this feeling does not last long, for they are also terrified about the possible consequences Moira will face if she is caught.

After eight to nine months of freedom, Moira's fate, notwithstanding, suffers a terrible twist. Her escape, once again, proves to be a major failure, for she is caught and forced to become a prostitute at Jezebel's. But the worst part is that the system finally breaks her and makes her believe she is the one choosing her own fate. When Offred sees her at Jezebel's, her first impression is the absurdity of the way she is dressed: "She's dressed absurdly, in a black outfit of once-shiny satin that looks the worse for wear. It's strapless, wired from the inside, pushing up the breasts, but it doesn't quite fit Moira, it's too large. . . . Attached to her head are two ears, of a rabbit or dear. . . . She has a black bow tie around her neck and is wearing net stockings and black high heels. She always hated high heels" (238-39). Moira does not belong there, as the description of the clothes and shoes clearly evidences. Moira is dressed as an animal—indicated by the costume she is wearing—, and as seen before, like animals, women are tamed to behave in a certain way.

After Moira is caught by the Eyes, she is first tortured: "All I can say is they didn't leave any marks" and then shown a movie "about life in the Colonies" and the women who end up in there, "incorrigibles like me" (248), Moira states. After this, Moira tells Offred about the "choice" she makes:

> So after that, they said I was too dangerous to be allowed the privilege of returning to the Red Center. They said I would be a corrupting influence. I had my *choice*, they said, this or the Colonies. Well, shit, nobody but a nun would pick the Colonies. I mean, I'm not a martyr. If I'd had my tubes tied years ago, I wouldn't even have needed the operation. Nobody in here with viable ovaries either, you can see what kind of problems it would cause. (249; emphasis added)

As discussed before, fear is one of the central discourses used in totalitarian states to manipulate and condition people. By means of violence and films, Moira is manipulated and made to believe she actually has a choice. What she cannot see is that the choice has already been made by other powerful people. Moira continues being an asset to this patriarchal society. Once she fulfills this role as prostitute, "[y]ou'd have three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the boneyard" (249), Moira reminds us, she will become an Unwoman and she will finally be sent to the Colonies. Her fate, in spite of the choice she thinks she has made, is to end up in the Colonies with the rest of "[d]iscards" (248).

The Moira Offred met in college, the Moira that was always defiant and independent, the Moira that escaped the Rachel and Leah Center has disappeared within Gilead. This is a turning point for Offred, who cannot believe Moira has been completely erased: "'Moira,' I say. 'You don't mean that.' She is frightening me now, because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition. Have they really done it to her then, taken away something–what?–that used to be so central to her? And how can I expect her

to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not?" (249). Moira has always been, up to this point, Offred's model to live by in Gilead. However, similar to the realization she has about her mother, Offred understands that it is not through Moira that she will obtain her own freedom. The fact that at the end of this section Offred wishes to tell a different story for Moira demonstrates that she finally faces her reality: she needs to act by herself because Moira, now broken, can no longer be her fantasy for escaping Gilead.

In the end, Moira suffers a similar fate to Serena and Offred's mother. Moira continues being a prisoner in Gilead; what changes is simply her location and garments. In a conversation in the bathroom, Offred asks her: "'You pick that out?' [referring to the outfit Moira is wearing] I say. I wonder if maybe she'd chosen it, out of the others, because it was less garish. At least it's only black and white. 'Hell no,' she says. 'Government issue. I guess they thought it was me'" (242). The club, also created by and for the most powerful men in Gilead, is also a prison run by Aunts with their cattle prods and rules: "'Fifteen minutes,' she [an Aunt] says to me" (241). Moira has changed her location from the Rachel and Leah Center, where she is indoctrinated to have sex with men in order to bear children, to a brothel, where she must have sex with men in order to satisfy their sexual "needs." In the end, Moira has changed a red habit for a sexy costume, both a direct mandate from the government.

From all the Handmaids that are trained in the Rachel and Leah Center, there are two who symbolize the two possible directions for them to take: Ofglen, Offred's partner outside the center, and Ofwarren (Janine), the only Handmaid that actually gets pregnant

and gives birth to a baby. Ofglen becomes Offred's double in the novel. In their first encounter, Offred decides to be careful with Ofglen because "[s]he may be a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name. I can't take the risk" (19). Later, however, once they become "more comfortable with one another" (165), Ofglen identifies herself as part of a resistance group and tells Offred she can join them; she is not a true believer after all (168). Ofglen has something Offred lacks and highly covets: knowledge. Ofglen knows things told to her by the "grapevine" and "networks" (202), things about the Commanders and their Handmaids, including Offred. Through Ofglen, Offred learns that her Commander is powerful: "He's way up there, says Ofglen. He's at the top, and I mean the very top" (210). Ofglen asks her to spy on the Commander, for they know about their private meetings: "find out and tell us. . . . Anything you can" (222-23).

Janine, on the other hand, epitomizes the classic victim of dystopia. She does and says what she is told, she behaves according to the rules, she becomes the ideal example for other Handmaids to follow, and yet, her fate is even worse than other Handmaids. As discussed before in this work, Janine is a true believer. She becomes Aunt Lydia's pet, a true victim of the system, which Offred dislikes (27). She excels at testifying in the center and blames herself for the gang-rape she suffered before Gilead at the age of 14 (71), the miscarriage she had when she was eight months pregnant, and the death of her baby girl Angela, the only child born in Gilead in Offred's account: "'She thinks it's her fault,' Ofglen whispers. 'Two in a row. For being sinful. She used a doctor, they say, it wasn't her Commander's at all'" (215). Janine's only mistake is to fully commit herself to fulfilling her role in Gilead.

Although the two Handmaids represent opposite extremes, like the other female characters in the novel, they are not able to escape from Gilead or its patriarchal rule. Ofglen, on one hand, as Offred learns through Ofglen's replacement "'hanged herself,' she says. 'After the Salvaging. She saw the van coming for her. It was better'" (285). Janine, on the other hand, loses her sanity. In her last appearance in the novel, at Particicution, Offred's description of Janine illustrates this:

> There's a smear of blood across her cheek, and more of it on the white of her headdress. She's smiling, a bright diminutive smile. Her eyes have come loose.
>
> "Hi there," she says. "How are you doing?" She's holding something, tightly, in her right hand. It's a clump of blond hair. She gives a small giggle.
>
> "Janine," I say. But she's let go, totally now, she's in free fall, she's in withdrawal.
>
> "You have a nice day," she says, and walks on past us, towards the gate.
>
> I look after her. Easy out, is what I think. I don't even feel sorry for her, although I should. I feel angry. I'm not proud of myself for this, or for any of it. But then, that's the point. (280-81)

Now that Ofglen is gone, Offred recognizes her sacrifice and becomes more aware of her precarious position: "Now that Ofglen is gone I am alert again, my sluggishness has fallen away, my body is no longer for pleasure only but senses its jeopardy. I should not be rash, I should not take unnecessary risks" (284). In the same way, Offred knows that she needs to keep her sanity, for it equals power: "I know where I am, and who, and what day

it is. These are the tests, and I am sane. Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes" (109).

Serena Joy, Offred's mother, Moira, Ofglen, and Janine are all examples of women who are defeated by the patriarchal system. Serena Joy's role in Gilead is static, and she becomes a prisoner of what she once thought was the ideal of marriage and women's role. Offred's mother, on the other hand, an enthusiastic activist, is silenced and sentenced to death in the Colonies. Moira's destiny is no better than other women's destinies: she is caught, broken, and forced into prostitution at Jezebel's. Both Ofglen and Janine, despite being opposites, suffer a terrible end: Ofglen sacrifices herself so that Offred and others can survive while Janine loses her sanity when she hits bottom. Unlike them, as I will analyze later, Offred finds a way to preserve her sanity, resist, and survive Gilead's patriarchy.

Offred's relationship with men in *The Handmaid's Tale* differs from the type of relationships she has with other women. To start with, women are not meant to relate to each other in order to avoid any kind of alliance that may lead to rebellion. Second, relationships in Gilead are determined according to functionality. Finally, men, no matter how low their status is, have power over women. Throughout the novel, Offred has three different relationships with three different men: Luke, her husband in the time before, Fred, Offred's Commander in Gilead, and Nick, Offred's lover in Gilead. Each relationship, particularly the ones in Gilead, represents an instance of resistance against a patriarchal system that attempts to erase any type of humanity and control women's lives.

Offred and Luke have what it seems to be a helathy good relationship in the time before. Nevertheless, due to Offred's recent situation, Offred starts remembering the times where Luke explicitly states the differences between men and women. For instance, Offred remembers how once Luke tells her about the meaning of the word fraternize: "*Fraternize* means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant *to behave like a sister*. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin. He liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages. I used to tease him about being pedantic" (11). In another scene at the supermarket, Luke explains to Offred why men and women are different regarding the amount of meat they are supposed to eat:

> Luke was over at the side of the store, out of sight, at the meat counter. He liked to choose what kind of meat we were going to eat during the week. He said men needed more meat than women did, and that it wasn't a superstition and he wasn't being a jerk, studies had been done. There are some differences, he said. He was fond of saying that, as if I was trying to prove there weren't. But mostly he said it when my mother was there. He liked to tease her. (63)

Luke's words and actions demonstrate that, as patriarchal discourse teaches, men and women are different based on biological differences and that based on those differences, men are superior to women in some aspects. Moreover, his insistence on "saying that" proves his, probably unconscious, rooted patriarchal thought and lack of awareness

regarding women's real situation. Finally, his words are meant to offend Offred's mother by diminishing her and her actions to a simple joke.

When Offred loses her job and the government transfers all her money to Luke, she feels insulted by Luke's reaction:

> It's only a job, he said, trying to soothe me.
>
> I guess you get all my money, I said. And I'm not even dead. I was trying for a joke, but it came out sounding macabre.
>
> Hush, he said. He was still kneeling on the floor. You know I'll always take care of you.
>
> I thought, Already he's starting to patronize me. Then I thought, Already you're starting to get paranoid. (179)

Offred is bound to her past, for in the past Luke was her escape from reality. Before they were married and met at hotels, Offred remembers how getting outside her own apartment was a major reason to meet with Luke, besides love and sex:

> So the hotels, with Luke, didn't mean only love or even only sex to me. They also meant time off from the cockroaches, the dripping sink, the linoleum that was peeling off the floor in patches, even from my own attempts to brighten things up by sticking posters on the wall and hanging prisms in the windows. I had plants, too; though they always got spider mites or died from being unwatered. I would go off with Luke, and neglect them. (172)

In a sense, Offred is expecting Luke to save her again the way he did when they were young. When Offred loses her job and does not know what to do, she claims she wants "Luke to

come home. I thought I should do something, take steps; but I didn't know what steps I could take" (177).

Since Offred does not know for certain what really happens to Luke, she wants to believe he is still alive. Thus, she is constantly afraid he will show up on the Wall: "What I feel is partly relief, because none of these men is Luke. Luke wasn't a doctor. Isn't" (33). Offred is desperately looking for some kind of news, for some kind of closure, for if she is not able to overcome her past, she will not be able to act in the present. At other times, especially when Offred is longing for human contact, she wishes her husband to be with her: "I wanted to feel Luke lying beside me, but there wasn't room" (52). Offred realizes that this longing for her past life with Luke has no "room" in her current life. She needs to learn how to live without him in the same way she accepts that her mother and Moira cannot be part of her survival and escape from Gilead.

The same night Offred loses her job, "Luke wanted to make love." Offred, on the other hand, felt different and did not want to. Luke tries to comfort her, but Offred recognizes that something has changed in their relationship: "We still have . . . he said. But he didn't go on to say what we still had. It occurred to me that he shouldn't be saying we, since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him. . . . But something had shifted, some balance." What torments her the most is to become aware that "[h]e doesn't mind this . . . . He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his." When Offred analyzes this once she is in Gilead, she tells Luke: "So Luke: what I want to ask you now, what I need to know is, Was I right? Because we never talked about it. By the time I could have done that, I was afraid to. I couldn't afford to lose you"

(182). At present, Offred realizes that her dependency on Luke blinded her in the past, which is why she needs to let him go. She is by herself now and if she wants to survive, she needs to do it by herself.

Therefore, in order to survive in dystopia, Offred learns that she needs to overcome her past, including Luke: "I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me. I want to steal something" (97). One of the key aspects in Gilead in order to erase women's identity is to force them to abandon their previous name. After strongly desiring to have Luke by her side and say her name—an impossibility—Offred resorts to repeating her name by herself and to herself. This action gives her power, and that power transitions into her wanting to steal something. It may not seem much, but in dystopia, the smallest act of transgression against the rules, as seen before, leads to a fatal fate.

Nick becomes Offred's lover in the Republic of Gilead after the Commander's Wife asks her to have sex with him to improve the possibilities of getting pregnant. Nevertheless, long before that, Offred plays a seduction game with him and once their relationship starts, she falls in love with him. Although seduction and desire are forbidden in Gilead, these natural instincts are impossible to suppress, and actually they empower her. The first time Offred sees Nick, she starts desiring him: "Despite myself, I think of how he might smell . . . tanned skin, moist in the sun, filmed with smoke. I sigh, inhaling" (18). Later, she wonders, "Where does the tan end?" (181). All these instances of seduction are accompanied by an

intrinsic desire to feel. For Offred, this desire translates into hunger: "We look at each other. I have no rose to toss, he has no lute. But it's the same kind of hunger" (191-92).

Even though Offred feels she is betraying Luke, she has made the choice to be with Nick, not because she is forced to do so, but because she wants to be with him: "I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn't called for, there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely. I didn't even think of it as giving myself to him, because what did I have to give? I did not feel munificent, but thankful, each time he would let me in. He didn't have to" (268). In Nick's hands, Offred finds love, which, as seen before, is underrated in Gilead. Offred describes her encounters with Nick as very passionate: "We make love each time as if we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that there will never be any more, for either of us, with anyone, ever. And then when there is, that too is always a surprise, extra, a gift" (269). She feels safe with Nick and choses to risk her life so she can feel alive. In a highly significant scene, Offred tells Nick her real name: "I tell him my real name, and feel therefore I am known. I act like a dunce. I should know better. I make of him an idol, a cardboard cutout" (270). By sharing her name with Nick, Offred demonstrates her need to define herself in other terms other than the ones Gilead decides for her.

Offred also has several secret, private, forbidden encounters with the Commander at night. The night of the Ceremony while Offred is wandering around the house, Nick tells her that the Commander wants to see her in his office. At first, Offred is not sure about his real intentions: "What does he mean by *see*? Hasn't he had enough of me?" (99). Then she considers the consequences of this encounter: "If I'm caught, it's to Serena's tender

mercies I'll be delivered. . . . After that, reclassification. I could become an Unwoman. But to refuse to see him could be worse. There's no doubt about who holds the real power" (136). Offred has no other option than to see him; however, she realizes that the Commander has a weakness, for the fact that he wants something may give her the possibility to exchange something: "It's a bargaining session," Offred recognizes. Offred finds "an oasis of the forbidden" (137) in the Commander's office, for it is full of books.[96] After she learns that the Commander wants to play a game of Scrabble, Offred wants to laugh, for she finds it almost absurd. A game that used to be played by old people and adolescents in the time before is now forbidden, dangerous, in Offred's words (138). At the end of their first meeting, the Commander asks Offred to kiss him, which she does because as with everything else, she has no other option. Despite this, Offred sees the potential of the whole situation: "But something has changed, now, tonight. Circumstances have altered. I can ask for something. Possibly not much; but something" (143-44).

In their second encounter, after they finish playing Scrabble, the Commander gives Offred a present: "a magazine, a woman's magazine" (156). Like a child, the Commander is rewarding Offred for her good behavior: "I felt the Commander watching me as I turned the pages. I knew I was doing something I shouldn't have been doing, and that he found pleasure in seeing me do it. I should have felt evil; by Aunt Lydia's lights, I was evil. But I didn't feel evil. Instead I felt like an old Edwardian seaside postcard: *naughty*. What was he going to give me next? A girdle?" (157). Although the Commander is obviously manipulating

[96] In this scene, one can see Offred's real interest, which is knowledge. Her reaction when seeing the books reflects this: "No wonder we can't come in here" (137).

Offred and showing her his power, Offred is not easily deceived. Instead, she uses this as an opportunity to get something she wants. Thus, in their third encounter, Offred asks the Commander for some lotion: "I [the Commander] think I could get some of that, he said, as if indulging a child's wish for bubble gum" (159).

In their fourth encounter, the Commander gives her the lotion. Similarly to the scene with the magazine, Offred knows the Commander takes pleasure in watching her: "He watched me smoothing it over my hands and then my face with that same air of looking in through the bars. I wanted to turn my back on him—it was as if he were in the bathroom with me—but I didn't dare" (159). In most of these encounters, Offred enjoys reading. She reads while the Commanders just watches her: "This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it. I wish he would turn his back, stroll around the room, read something himself. Then perhaps I could relax more, take my time. As it is, this illicit reading of mine seems a kind of performance" (184). In their sixth encounter, though, Offred says she wants to talk instead of reading: "Either he talks or I will. I know it, I can feel speech backing up inside me. . . ." But being extremely careful, Offred adds, "I don't want him to know too much" (185).

It is on this night that Offred asks the Commanders about the phrase in Latin she found in her closet. When she writes the phrase on a piece of paper and holds the pen between her fingers, she states that she "can feel its power, the power of words it contains." The Commander tells her that the phrase is not real Latin, that it is actually a joke. "'A joke?' I say, bewildered now. It can't be only a joke. Have I risked this, made a grab at knowledge, for a mere joke?" (186). The Commander explains its meaning: "Oh. It meant,

'Don't let the bastards grind you down'" (187). After this, Offred understands two things. First, she understands the meaning and the reason why the previous Handmaid left that message for her, and, second, she realizes she must have learned it in here. Now Offred is able to confirm that this arrangement is not new; he must have had the same type of meetings with the former Offred. The message is very significant because after writing it, the former Offred hanged herself. "Maybe I shouldn't come here anymore" (187), Offred tells the Commander and then she says, "'I would like to know.' . . . 'Whatever there is to know,' . . . 'What's going on'" (188). At this point, Offred has become more audacious and impulsive, for what she desires most of all is some kind of knowledge.

In a later encounter, the Commander tells Offred what he thinks was the problem that led to the establishment of the Republic of Gilead: "The problem wasn't only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore . . . there was nothing for them to do with women" (210). The "[i]nability to feel," in the words of the Commander, was the main reason. Now that they have complete control over women, they are able to feel again: "We thought we could do better. . . . Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some" (211).

All of these games, talks, gifts, and kisses are simply the foreplay for the final encounter Offred and the Commander have at Jezebel's. In order to take her there, the Commander asks Offred to wear a costume; for a night, she will become a Jezebel, a sexual object for the Commander's pleasure: "It's a garment, apparently, and for a woman: there are the cups for the breasts, covered in purple sequins. The sequins are tiny stars. The feathers are around the thigh holes, and along the top. So I wasn't that wrong about the

girdle, after all" (230). Offred's account of what happens at the brothel focuses more on her encounter with Moira than with the Commander. The Commander asks her to "act natural" (235) so that others do not know she does not belong there. He speaks for her, leads her way and lets the disguise to "perform its function." Offred adds, "It occurs to me he is showing off. He is showing me off. . . . But also he is showing off to me. He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world" (236).

After showing her off, the Commander shows Offred a room key: "I am to understand. . . . I am to understand also that I am on display" (251). Offred spends more time describing the room and the bathroom than describing the actual sexual act. She feels uncomfortable: "Alone at last, I think. The fact is that I don't want to be alone with him, not on a bed. I'd rather have Serena there too. I'd rather play Scrabble" (254). When Offred asks him why he brought her there, he replies: "'I thought you might enjoy it for a change.' He knows that isn't enough. 'I guess it was a sort of experiment.' That isn't enough either. 'You said you wanted to know'" (254). Offred tries to convince herself that the Commander is not a bad person, that "[h]e is not a monster." Nevertheless, Offred is definitely not enjoying it: "Fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. You must remember how. Let's get this over with or you'll be here all night. Bestir yourself. Move your flesh around, breathe audibly. It's the least you can do" (255).

Offred resists the Commander at all costs: "For him, I must remember, I am only a whim" (159). She even resists calling it a relationship, for she knows theirs is simply an "arrangement" (160). "I refused to believe he felt anything for me as extreme as [love]" (161). Unlike the Commander, Offred truly understands the terms of their agreement: "The

fact is I'm his mistress. Men at the top have always had mistresses, why should things be any different now? . . . I am the outside woman. It's my job to provide what is otherwise lacking. Even the Scrabble. It's absurd as well as an ignominious position" (163). Even though she has to submit to the Commander's sexual desire, she does it knowingly, not believing in a role imposed on her, but trying to resist, to survive.

The three relationships Offred has with men, both in the past and in the present, teach her, on the one hand, to resist patriarchal constraints and, on the other hand, they motivate her not to give up, for the future may bring something better. She loves Luke and Nick and feels sympathy for the Commander. However, her feelings for these men do not interfere with her narration, for they are just secondary characters in her life story. She becomes aware of these men's weaknesses and sexist behaviors and resists them in order to survive in this dystopia.

Constructing Subjectivity Through Resistance: Who Can Speak?

In a patriarchy, in a totalitarian state, and in dystopia, women's voices are silenced, muted. Only the One, who is in a position of power, has the right to speak; his is the authorized speech. Nevertheless, those who are at the bottom of the hierarchy sometimes find a way to make their voices be heard: resistance through narration is one of these ways. The limitations for those who do not have the right to speak are many, and in dystopia, as seen before, to defy the regime, to become a dissident will result in the character's inevitable death, for rebels are silenced through death. Thus, in dystopia, to act does not

necessarily mean to openly defy the system, but to resist the system, survive, and find a way to make one's voice heard.

In the Republic of Gilead, all women are forced to be silent. As objects for the common good, women have no agency or autonomy over their lives. Their voices are mechanical; their conversations monotonous; everything they say seems to be rehearsed, and most of the time they, particularly the Handmaids, lower their voices and even murmur when speaking to others. Their voices are mutilated. However, Offred is able to tell her story, and to tell a story implies to have a voice, even though that voice is being constantly oppressed.

The authorized, official speech in Gilead consists of the religious discourse analyzed in the previous chapter. This discourse demands the full submission of women to men. Those men who hold higher positions in this society, such as the Commanders, are the ones who, as Offred states, have "the word" (88). The night of the Ceremony, Offred acknowledges the power that words have when she refers to the Bible the Commander is holding: "It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read" (87). Women are not allowed to read, and Offred recognizes the reason behind it: knowledge is power, and with power, the possibilities to question and resist the system appear. Offred craves holding that power in her hands: "He [the Commander] has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once." The last remark depicts Offred's longing for voice; in the past it was something she took for granted and now lacks. Offred's desire is also

evidenced when she criticizes the way the Commander reads: "The Commander, as if reluctantly, begins to read. He isn't very good at it. Maybe he's merely bored" (88).

Although she is denied the exercise of her voice, Offred resists the authorized speech by creating her own *word*. She accomplishes this, for instance, by reading and transforming the message the former Handmaid left for her: "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*" The first time Offred sees the message inside the cupboard, she notices that it was written "in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell." Even though the message is hidden in the darkest corner of the closet, it is still "fresh" and relevant, for it is contact, human contact, between the former Handmaid and herself: "I didn't know what it meant, or even what language it was in. I thought it might be Latin, but I didn't know any Latin. Still, it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next." The description of the message evokes a feeling of hope. Any human contact is forbidden in Gilead and yet Offred is able to communicate intimately, intensely: "It pleases me to think I'm *communing* with her, this unknown woman" (emphasis added). She is certain the message was intended for her, and she will soon discover the relevance of the phrase if she wants to survive this dystopian society: "Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy" (52).

Later, even though Offred is unfamiliar with the meaning of the phrase, she uses it as her own prayer when she is asked to pray at the Ceremony: "I pray silently: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.* I don't know what it means but it sounds right . . . " (90). Offred

refuses to follow the accepted prayer and instead uses her own, believing that these unknown words make more sense than the ones she is supposed to say, the ones she learned in the Rachel and Leah Center. Moreover, although the message is simple and short, almost imperceptible in the closet where she finds it, little by little, similar to her narration, it gains strength. When Offred learns the real meaning of the phrase, she is more than certain what she needs to do: "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (187). Offred follows this advice by escaping Gilead, narrating her story, and challenging the authorized speech.

Outside Gilead and almost two hundred years later, Offred's account is analyzed by a group of academics. In their hands, Offred's story has become a historical account, and as such, its focus has shifted. Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, who is the keynote speaker, discredits Offred's account for she does not provide enough information about the reality of Gilead. The title of his talk, "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale,*" provides clear evidence that he does not entirely believe Offred's account. He finds several problems regarding Offred's tale. To start with, he believes what they have in their hands "is not the item in its original form," for it is not a manuscript (300). Second, by calling it an "item" instead of a document, Pieixoto refuses to treat it with relevance in the same way he treats the other discoveries made before this one; he states that one of their concerns was that "the tapes might be a forgery" (302).

Ironically, the speaker asks his audience to "be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. . . . Our job is not to censure but to understand" (302). However, he is the first to do so, for he tries to censure Offred's story, just like Gilead did.

As a historian, Pieixoto feels compelled to look for facts. For instance, he explains the regime and the possible reasons for its establishment (304-05). Pieixoto calls all names in Gilead "useless for the purposes of identification and authentication." He believes these were actually "pseudonyms, adopted to protect these individuals should the tapes be discovered" (306). He is obviously not interested in Offred's life and story but in the life of the Commander and the regime itself. He spends a lot of time trying to figure out the Commander's identity, his position in Gilead, the different rituals held in there, and the power structure of Gilead.

In spite of this rejection, Offred resists the hegemonic speech outside Gilead by proving her voice to be resilient. She finds power through voicing her story, defying Gilead's strict structure by creating her own flexible and dynamic narrative structure, as I will analyze later. Most importantly, her account, not a written account but a spoken one, is what remains after two hundred years; it is the one that endures. The possibilities for it to survive are few, and still her story does survive. In a sense, Offred's actual voice is not really the one being analyzed, for what they are actually analyzing is a transcript of the tapes they found. Although these men fail to recognize the essence of her tale, her story will live on because her story is what defines her. In her own words, "I tell, therefore you are" (268). Her story survived while the Republic of Gilead and its history did not.

Offred refers to her own story as a reconstruction:

> This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or

> shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here—
>
> Let's stop there. I intend to get out of here. It can't last forever. Others have thought such things, in bad times before this, and they were always right, they did get out one way or another, and it didn't last forever. Although for them it may have lasted all the forever they had. (134)

The Republic of Gilead has constructed a new life for Offred, where she is subjected to Gilead's authority, imposed identity, and rules. Nevertheless, Offred reconstructs her story, which allows her to simultaneously reconstruct her subjectivity, for she is no longer a silent object. In this reconstruction, Offred's own reconstruction, she recovers control and power to change things, and there is also hope. Her story and subjectivity are tied to each other, and because of this, Offred, one way or another, as she asserts, will survive and escape Gilead despite the obstacles.

Offred also believes in the power of her narration and the fact that her story will reach others:

> When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can

> never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many. (134)

Offred's determination to tell her story is evidenced in these lines. Through the telling of her story, one voice to another, she has now the power to reconstruct her subjectivity because she has recovered her voice. As a subject, voiced and able to make her own decisions, Offred decides how to tell a story, including gaps, conflicts, and meanings. The last part of the previous quote defines Offred as a storyteller, outlining the aspects that she will narrate of her story, her life once she escapes Gilead. She becomes a subject the moment she makes the conscious decision to tell her story and how she wants to tell it. Offred's reconstruction is a clear manifestation of the changes she undergoes in Gilead.

As part of the process of telling her story and reconstructing her subjectivity, Offred addresses the men who will distrust and judge her account later:

> But if you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you've made it this far, please remember: you will never be subject to the temptation or feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman. It's difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest. (134-35)

Men, Offred recognizes, will find it difficult to understand her story, for they have not been subjected to or experienced the things she and other women have. As a subject, though, Offred will have the power to decide whether or not forgiveness should be bestowed, and that is what power represents for her. After this, she concludes that the power to forgive

is greater than the power to control others, which reinforces her condition of a subject capable of making decisions:

> Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing. (135)

Recalcitrance: Resistance Inside Offred's Story

> We lived in the blank spaces at the edges of print. We lived in the gaps between the stories.
>
> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

According to H. Potter Abbott, stories are "always mediated—by a voice, a style of writing . . . what we call the story is really something that we construct" (20). Offred's story is a reconstruction, as she calls it several times, and it helps the protagonist to reconstruct her subjectivity through its narration. Offred's narrative is a story of survival and resistance against a totalitarian, patriarchal regime that attempts to silence women's voices. "[M]uted groups," Elaine Showalter argues, "must fate their beliefs through the allowable forms of dominant structures. Another way of putting this would be to say that all language is the language of the dominant order, and women, if they speak at all, must speak through it" ("Feminist Criticism" 262). In the Republic of Gilead, at the level of communication, the Handmaids learn to whisper to each other in order to communicate: "We learned to

whisper almost without sound" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 4). At the level of rights, the Handmaids and other groups of women are taught to be completely silenced because exercising their voices is a forbidden act. The Daughters, for instance, the youngest generation of women in Gilead, have always been silent (219). The authorized speech in Gilead, as discussed before, belongs to those in power, men.

Thus, Offred, like Scheherezade in *One Thousand and One Night,* tells stories to survive: "I intend to last" (8), Offred tells us at the beginning of her narration. She does it so she can freely communicate with others, both by addressing Luke, her mother, and others, and by addressing the reader/listener, for she is certain her story will be heard. Moreover, Offred speaks not only for herself but also on behalf of others, those who continue to be silenced in Gilead. Her refusal to give her real name symbolizes this, as she becomes the voice of others who cannot speak. Finally, and most importantly, Offred tells her story in order to challenge the authorized speech both inside and outside the Republic of Gilead, for her voice is the one that survives patriarchy. Throughout her narration, Offred symbolically takes the "of" off her name which symbolizes her lack of name, her imposed identity, and her red habit. She is no longer the possession of a man or a society that objectifies her. Instead, she resists this objectification and what is left is her true self.

The Handmaid's Tale is divided into fourteen sections, and seven of them are titled Night, for Offred tells most of her story at night, in her room, when she is alone: "The night is mine, my own time, to do with it as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don't move. As long as I lie still." Despite the limitations Offred faces due to the strict rules she is forced to live by, she finds her own time and place in her mind to tell her story: "[T]he night is my

time out. Where should I go? Somewhere good" (37). Offred's tale is a mixture of present accounts and memories from the time before Gilead, which serve to contrast her present, almost unbearable state. Her narration is honest, full of details, and it presents the ups and downs of an individual in a totalitarian regime who struggles to survive in a society that objectifies its citizens, destroys their subjectivity, and condemns them to die if they refuse to follow the rules.

Offred starts her account as a Handmaid, as part of a collectivity: "*We slept* in what had once been the gymnasium" (3; emphasis added). Offred starts her account with the use of the pronoun *we* which demonstrates her lack of individuality and her loss of subjectivity; she is now a part of a group with a specific function in Gilead. Also, she uses a verb (slept) that implies a passive, almost inert state, and the past tense of the verb indicates that the events she is about to narrate have already occurred. When Offred finishes the story, however, many things have happened, including the fact that she is no longer an object of Gilead. Thus, as a subject, her narration finishes with a statement that reinforces her individuality: "And so *I step up*, into the darkness within; or else the light" (295; emphasis added). The pronoun *I* defines her subjectivity and the recovery of her individuality, for she no longer belongs to a collectivity or speaks through one. Instead, now that she has recovered her voice, she has become a free individual and an autonomous subject. Also, the verb she uses (step up) connotes action, movement, progress, and improvement, and the present tense marks her final act of resistance against the regime. Offred is still alive, at present, against all odds.

The story is told through a first-person narrator. The voice we hear doing the narration is the voice of an oppressed woman who struggles every day with a patriarchal society that keeps her prisoner and under the strict rule of a few but strongly powerful people. The major advantage of having Offred as first-person narrator is that she is in full control of her narrative. According to Abbott, "when the voice is strong or interesting enough, it may be that the narrator herself, rather than the story, is the center of interest" (72). This is, without a doubt, the case of Offred, and this is exactly what the male professors in the Historical Notes fail to see. They do not fully trust Offred's tale because her account lacks, according to them, facts and objectivity. Offred's narrative is highly descriptive and her narration is fragmented, just like her life is. The events are not told chronologically; instead, there are many flashbacks to the protagonist's past that help her understand the events she lives in the present and the decisions she has made, the ones she has to make, and the ones she will make in the future. Offred decides what to say and how to say it in her story. She has an intended audience in mind, an audience she expects will eventually get her message and help keep her voice alive. Sometimes the audience is Luke or her mother; at some other times she seems to address us, the readers/listeners so that we can truly connect with her story. She justifies and analyzes her own actions, apologizes for some, and leaves out some parts, including what happens after she escapes. Significantly, as a first-person narrator, Offred defines herself as an independent individual, not a collectivity, for this is her story.

Early in the novel, Offred wonders about the significance of her story: "I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can

believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it." This is the first reference that Offred makes about her life in Gilead being a story. At this point, Offred wants to believe that her story has power so she can control the ending of it, but she does not: "It isn't a story I'm telling" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 39). Offred states this after having three different flashbacks with the three most important women in her previous life: Moira, her mother, and her daughter. The last flashback is particularly painful, for it is a brief and incomplete scene that refers to the moment she wakes up in Gilead and realizes her daughter has been taken away.

Offred is dealing with the loss of not only herself, but the loss of those who were part of her life. Due to this, Offred, understandably, does not want to tell the story. Nevertheless, she does not stop there. The conditional statement in the previous quote, "If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending," demonstrates that there is a possibility for her to make this her story and by doing so having control over it. Despite the sad tone in this section, there is also a chance for Offred to take control. Offred's ability to face reality is crucial to keep her sanity in Gilead and survive, and this is why she accepts that she cannot control her life in Gilead and will never do so. Nevertheless, once she continues telling her story, as seen in the previous section, she does control her story, and when she recovers that control, she is able to move on and recover other aspects of her life that were taken away, such as an identity. As a storyteller and a person who intends to last, Offred ends up believing in the power and relevance of her story, even if it is full of pain.

As seen before, one of the most detrimental aspects of life in Gilead is women's lack of voice. Before she escapes the regime, Offred is aware of the fact that there is no chance she can write her story, so she needs to tell it in her head: "Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden" (39). This is where Offred starts taking control over her narrative. An oral narration of her story is powerful for two major reasons. First, it is through her own voice that the story is told,[97] which stands in direct opposition against Gilead's authorized speech. Second, the fact that Offred's narration transgresses the strict rules of Gilead makes her a dissident of the system. She finishes this section by acknowledging her audience and making it a part of the story: "But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else" (39-40).

Now that Offred is ready to take control over her story, she starts making this story hers while diminishing Gilead's power. When Offred is in finally control of her story, she chooses what to tell and how to tell it. Her narration is full of gaps and interruptions that reflect her fragmented life and identity in Gilead. According to Abbott, the major gaps in a story are usually filled in with the help of the text itself. The fact that the story is not told chronologically is one example of this, for readers need to go back and forth to fill in these gaps. At the beginning of the novel, for instance, it is not clear how or why Gilead exists. However, after the scene where some Japanese tourists come to visit the city and ask to take a picture of the Handmaids, and Offred's flashbacks towards the first events that led

[97] The narration, as we learn in the Historical Notes, consists of approximately thirty tape cassettes.

to the establishment of Gilead, we realize that Gilead's system has not reached the entire world, and it never did, as we learn from the Historical Notes. The fact that the patriarchal system of Gilead did not spread but disappeared demonstrates that the regime had its weaknesses. A woman's voice is actually stronger and survives. Two major gaps in the story are the way Gilead ends and the fate of the protagonist, for the Historical Notes take place two hundred years later. What is most relevant, for this work's purpose, is to emphasize the facts that it did end and that Offred reached her freedom.

The multiple references to the past, in the form of memories, personal reflections about her story, and even the descriptions of flowers[98] in the narrative serve as micronarratives to understand Offred's present life in Gilead, to appreciate her emotions and choices, and to understand how she constructs a new subjectivity. These are usually short introductions that frame the narrative in each section. Most sections entitled "Night" in the novel start and/or finish with a memory from the time before, and these sections are usually shorter than the rest; they are intense and highly emotional. In the first Night-section, Offred utters the Handmaid's major wish: "We yearned for the future" (3). The section finishes with the Handmaids murmuring their real names: "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (4). These two examples complement each other because both make reference to what the Handmaids have lost in Gilead: their names and their freedom. In the second and third Night-sections, Offred remembers Moira, her mother, and Luke.

[98] Regarding this Offred states, "I've tried to put some of the good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?" (267).

Sections four, five, and six deal with her new relationships with the Commander and Nick, and the last one, number seven, focuses on Offred's final feelings and her rescue. I will now analyze some of these sections in depth.

In the third Night-section, in an attempt to reconcile with her past (and present) situation with Luke, Offred creates three different versions to what might have happened to Luke, for after they were caught when trying to escape to Canada, Offred does not know anything about him. In the first version, Luke dies: "I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket. . . . What is left of him: his hair, the bones, the plaid wool shirt. . . . His face is beginning to fade, possibly because it wasn't always the same: his face had different expressions, his clothes did not." In this version, Offred wants to believe that Luke's death was quick and painless: "I pray that the hole, or two or three, there was more than one shot, they were close together, I pray that at least one hole is neatly, quickly, and finally through the skull, through the place where all the pictures were, so that there would have been only the one flash, of darkness or pain. . ." (104).

In the second version, Luke is still alive, which gives her a possibility of finding out his fate: "God isn't the only one who knows, so maybe there could be some way of finding out" (104). In this version he is caught and kept "somewhere," and Offred pictures him older, ten to twenty years older, in pain, filthy, and trapped. For Offred, it is easier to pretend that he is resting for she "can't bear to imagine him at any other time" and she wonders whether or not he thinks of her: "Does he know I'm here, alive, that I'm thinking about him? I have to believe so. In reduced circumstances you have to believe all kinds of things" (105). In the last version, Luke succeeds and escapes:

> I also believe that they didn't catch him or catch up with him after all, that he made it, reached the bank, swam the river, crossed the border . . . found his way to a nearby farmhouse, was allowed in, with suspicion at first, but then when they understood who he was, they were friendly, not the sort who would turn him in, perhaps they were Quakers, they will smuggle him inland, from house to house." (105)

But most of all, Offred wants to communicate with Luke, and this wish gives her hope: "Any day there may be a message from him. It will come in the most unexpected way, from the least likely person, someone I never would have suspected." At this point in the story, Offred symbolizes the typical damsel in distress, waiting to be rescued: "The message will say that I must have patience: sooner or later he will get me out, we will find her, wherever they've put her. She'll remember us and we will be all three of us together. Meanwhile I must endure, keep myself safe for later. . . . It's this message, which may never arrive, that keeps me alive. I believe in the message" (106). In this version, Offred places Luke in the category of the classic hero. This fantasy of hers, though it makes her resemble a stock character in classic literature, demonstrates, first, her desire to escape from Gilead, and, second, her wish to have any kind of human contact, which is why she fantasizes about receiving this message. Unfortunately, fantasies have no room in dystopia.

In the traditional sense, none of these versions is or can be real for many reasons and Offred is aware of this: "The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything.

Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it" (106). For Offred, to believe this is better than never knowing what really happened to Luke.[99] In this way, by creating different endings and hence taking control of her story and that of others, she is able to cope and survive instead of giving up.

Similarly, in the fourth Night-section, she recalls watching a documentary about "a woman who had been the mistress of a man who had supervised one the camps where they put the Jews, before they killed them," after the first time the Commander asks Offred to see him in private at night. "From what they said," Offred continues, "the man had been cruel and brutal. . . . The woman said she didn't notice much that she found unusual. She denied knowing about the ovens" (145). The story serves as a parallel for what is going on between the Commander and Offred in secret. Offred sees herself as the mistress, for she justifies her actions: "All this she would have believed, because otherwise how could she have kept on living?" The question is for herself; Offred understands that she must act as the Commander's mistress if she wants to live. Unlike the mistress she saw in the documentary, Offred does not deceive herself, she does not live an illusion: "Several days after this interview with her was filmed, she killed herself" (146).

In the fifth Night-section, Offred reflects about her feelings for Nick and Luke. Offred is attracted to Nick in her present life; she craves human contact, and Nick seems the only

[99] The same happens after Offred encounters Moira at Jezebel's. Disappointed by Moira's defeat, Offred's wishes to create a different ending for her: "Here is what I'd like to tell. I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again" (250).

one willing to give her that, even if it is by chance. However, this craving creates an inner conflict, for Offred feels she is betraying Luke: “One and one and one and one doesn’t equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other. Nick for Luke or Luke for Nick. *Should* does not apply” (192). After this, Offred recalls that the night before they attempted to escape, Luke had to kill the cat to avoid being caught. Similarly to the story about the mistress, Offred relates the death of the cat to the death of something bigger within herself, for she never asked nor took responsibility for it: “That’s one of the things they [the Eyes] do. They force you to kill, within yourself” (193). In both sections, Offred judges herself severely, for she feels she is betraying Luke in both cases: “You can’t help what you feel, Moira once said, but you can help how you behave” (192). Offred is conscious about what she has to do at present; she is taking responsibility for her own actions and behavior, including her relationship with Nick. Offred is leaving her role of victim behind, becoming, in Atwood words, a creative non-victim. As seen before, creative non-victims are true survivors, and in Offred’s case she survives a male-dominated society.

The last two Night-sections narrate Offred’s sexual encounters with Nick, Offred’s falling in love with him, and Offred’s rescue through him. As seen before, Offred controls the narrative of the different encounters she has with Nick, for she creates different versions of it that help her deal with her feelings. Offred makes a choice and finds the comfort and human contact that she longs for the entire narrative. In the final section, left without any other alternative, Offred is forced to believe Nick when he tells her that it is Mayday who is coming for her, which leads to her freedom. Throughout all these sections,

Offred's honest account, including her weak moments, shows that she is overcoming the obstacles that do not allow her to be an autonomous individual. The decisions that Offred makes regarding her story, what she says and how she tells it, show that Offred has become more confident about her own voice, and, at the same time, they help her define herself in her own terms.

In dystopia, as seen before, any act of disloyalty or disobedience against the system results in the death of the person, for even if they are sent to the Colonies, their death is certain. Thus, for Offred to tell her story is not an easy choice. Almost at the end of the novel, after Offred finds out that Ofglen has hanged herself so that the Eyes would not torture or make her confess about Mayday, Offred acknowledges Ofglen's sacrifice, but she is terrified:

> Everything they taught at the Red Center, everything I've *resisted*, comes flooding in. I don't want pain. I don't want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head a faceless oblong of white cloth. I don't want to be a doll hung up on the Wall, I don't want to be a wingless angel. I want to keep on living, *in any form*. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me.
>
> I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power. (286; emphasis added)

Offred is terrified for her life and her potential pregnancy, and the loss of Ofglen is her last wake-up call. She confesses she has resisted the teachings of the Aunts in the Rachel and Leah Center and reinforces her will to live. She also refuses to share other Handmaids' fates

but realizes her choices have become limited. Escaping from Gilead is almost impossible, the case of Moira is the clearest example of this. Although Moira stays underground for almost nine months and she is about to reach freedom, she is caught and sent to Jezebel's where her rebellious spirit is finally broken, as seen before. Offred understands her chances to escape Gilead are low, but she refuses to give up entirely. "In any form," Offred asserts, she will live. Even if she is not able to escape or survive Gilead, her voice will be heard.

Her story, in spite of those low moments, is her source of survival. As long as she keeps telling it, including those horrible things that happen to her, she will be able to resist:

> I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow. (267)

Because of her emotional state due to what she experiences inside Gilead, Offred is not able to realize that her story is actually active and full of sudden realizations that help her survive. Little by little, however, she comes to realize this: "Maybe it is about those things, in a way; but in the meantime there is so much else getting in the way, so much whispering, so much speculation about others, so much gossip that cannot be verified, so many unsaid words, so much creeping about and secrecy." She ends, once again, by addressing her audience and apologizing for the contents of her story: "I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it" (267). By addressing an intended audience,

Offred is regaining faith that her narration will survive and her voice will be heard: “So I will go on. So I will myself to go on. . . . I will try nonetheless to leave nothing out. After all you’ve been through, you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth” (268). These moments of resistance are the ones that help her define herself and to recompose her destroyed subjectivity.

One common example of formal recalcitrance, in the words of Austin M. Wright, is the open-ended story. According to Wright, this kind of story is recalcitrant because it rejects conventional forms, that is, beginnings and endings (119). Due to its nature, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an example of final recalcitrance because we, as readers, have “to look back, recalculate, and reconsider, so as to satisfy the expectation of wholeness . . . brought to the story” (121). This happens for two reasons. First, Offred’s verbal account finishes when she is taken away in a black van. Significantly, it is not clear whether the van belongs to the Eyes or the resistance group Mayday. However, the ending of the story, once we look back, recalculate, and reconsider, is actually the beginning of the story, for it is after Offred escapes that she is able to actually tell her story. Although Offred’s account has clear references that her story is a reconstruction of something that has already occurred, it is not until one reads the Historical Notes that their narrator confirms that Offred’s tale is actually a manuscript of a series of tape cassettes found some time ago. At the end we recognize that the major conflict in the novel has been resolved: Offred escapes the boundaries of the Republic of Gilead and by doing so constructs her subjectivity and challenges the regime.

What seems to oppose this unusual closure in the novel is the frame narrative. At the end of the novel, after Offred's account reaches its ending, we realize her tapes are being analyzed in the "*Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies* . . . *on June 25, 2195*" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 299).[100] Unlike other narratives, where the frame story frames the embedded story, that is, it starts and finishes the text, the Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale* frame the story only at the end. Traditionally, the secondary narrative usually affects the meaning and effect of the main one. Nevertheless, in this particular case, and because of the novel's genre, the secondary narrative functions as a second and final warning for the readers about the dangers of patriarchy. Dystopia usually reflects a society's current anxieties, and its negative portrayal responds to the need to criticize society and warn readers of the possible consequences of today's actions in the future. Readers of dystopia are expected to act and change what is wrong with their society. In the same way, the novel's double warning attempts to make readers become aware of the need to change sexist practices in the world.

In a patriarchal state, men, the hegemonic group, subject women's identity, including their roles, to their needs. Thus, women become objects, most of the time sexual objects, and lose their condition of subjects; in other words, they become the other for they are defined by the One. Once Offred becomes a prisoner in the Republic of Gilead, she loses her previous life and everything related to it, her family, voice, identity, and subjectivity. According to Meyers and Pacheco, "The state of otherness refers to the

[100] Two hundred years later, Offred's account is under strict surveillance, just like she was in Gilead.

marginalized condition of those who are not in a position of power in terms of the hegemonic group" (147). Women's daily reality and experiences evidence their inferior position in society, for in a patriarchy, women are placed at the bottom of the hierarchical model. At the beginning of her account, Offred's identity is replaced when she is forced to fulfill the role of a Handmaid. She belongs now to a collectivity of women whose only purpose to exist relies on their ability to bear children. Her objectification as a reproductive vessel erases her subjectivity, for her new identity is defined in terms of what the One decides. However, even though Offred is defined by others, her resistance to this new role, as evidenced throughout her narration, opens for her the possibility of constructing her own subjectivity; in other words, to define herself, on her own terms.

Subjectivities, as discussed before, are never static, and they imply a "degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity" (Hall 3). This flexibility is what allows Offred to define herself, not in terms of the One, but in her own terms and through her narration. According to Belsey and Foucault, as argued before, in order to create true subjectivity, individuals need to resist imposed identities. In a patriarchal, dystopian society, to openly resist imposed identities leads to the person's certain death. In any other society Offred could raise her voice and fight for her rights, but not in a totalitarian state. In a totalitarian state, she is supposed to silently and submissively follow the rules if she wants to live.

Offred learns to resist the system by acting, performing, which in her case refers to the telling of her story. If what constitutes a subject is the performance (and repetition) of acts, in the words of Judith Butler, the construction of subjectivity will depend on those performances, for they are the ones that truly define what an individual is. Offred's

narration, then, does not reflect a woman who is completely silenced and confined; her story is a story that manifests a woman who is able to free herself from the constraints of a patriarchal society. Offred refuses to be normalized in a society that forces her to adopt a new identity. Her resistance comes with the subversion of a patriarchal system through the exercise of her voice. She defines herself and becomes a subject again through the telling of her story, through the exercising of her voice. According to Butler, "The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition*. . . ." Thus, agency, Butler argues, "is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (*Gender Trouble* 185). Performing, in the case of Offred, is the act of speaking and telling her story, which allows the possibility of variation in her story.

Thus, Offred constructs her subjectivity by resisting imposed roles and patriarchal rules, through the exercise of her voice, and by surviving an almost impossible-to-survive dystopia; she is not trapped in her role as a Handmaid, does not commit suicide, end up in the Colonies, or lose her mind. In addition, Offred constructs her subjectivity by surviving in spite of patriarchy, for she surpasses masculine oppression, and by challenging the authorized speech in the Republic of Gilead and that of the Historical Notes. She does all this by narrating her story and by deciding what to tell, why to tell it, when to tell it, and how to tell it. Offred recovers her voice, and her voice transcends both the patriarchal discourse in Gilead and that of the symposium, almost two hundred years later, because her voice and tale are free of the constraints of patriarchy, and they are the ones that survive and will continue to survive. Offred lives in the gaps between stories and in the gaps

between places and time by her own determination, her own choice. In other words, the protagonist, who is no longer Offred, creates a new identity for herself and narrates her story, no longer as Gilead's object, but autonomously. Thus, her storytelling is what ultimately makes her a subject.

CHAPTER VI:
IN-CONCLUSIONS

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood has been analyzed abundantly since its publication in 1985. Offred, the protagonist, has been criticized and characterized as the typical damsel in distress or victim, and her apparent passivity has been seen as a failure to resist the patriarchal discourse in the novel. I began this work with a clear idea in my mind: to defend Offred from the critics who believe that she is a passive character, unable to act by herself.

In order to free Offred from this misinterpreted identity, I needed to first analyze her context, and her context, as seen before, is a very complex and limiting one. Offred lives in a dystopian society, a totalitarian, theocratic, patriarchal state that destroys her subjectivity and transforms her into an object. They succeed, at first. Offred becomes nameless, a sexual object, and her identity is replaced by a function: a two-legged womb, in Offred's words. Although limitations and obstacles are many, and choices are almost inexistent, Offred *does* find a way to overcome the patriarchal regime: storytelling.

Isolated from the world, her family, and friends, Offred narrates her story in order to survive. Once she starts exercising her voice, she resists objectification and reconstructs her subjectivity because it is through the telling of her life story that she rejects the imposed roles she is given in Gilead and defines who she really is. Offred survives the totalitarian regime in Gilead, and as a dystopian heroine, she defies the patriarchal discourse and succeeds in making her voice heard, transcending the boundaries of the Republic of Gilead,

even after its destruction two hundred years later. Offred's voice survives, and Gilead is at last powerless to reside within her.

Margaret Atwood is a magnificent storyteller. She tells women's stories, their different realities, and the obstacles they must face in their lives. All of her female protagonists prove to be strong and resilient, for they overcome those obstacles in different and sometimes unconventional ways. Her female protagonists become "creative non-victims," Atwood's own words, for once they do not define themselves as victims but start making choices and taking responsibility for their own actions, they can actually reject the role of victim. Most importantly, Atwood gives all these women voice so they can tell their stories. For Offred, the protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale,* to tell her story represents not only her resistance against the dystopian society, but also her ability to overcome obstacles and reconstruct her subjectivity. Atwood decides to use science fiction, or speculative fiction, as she prefers to call it, as the genre to narrate this powerful story in order to warn readers about the dangers of patriarchy and theocracy both in the present and in the future.

As previously discussed, one of the main characteristics of science fiction literature is the ability to foresee different futures, futures that often reflect and criticize an aspect of the present. During the twentieth century, many writers turned to dystopias in an attempt to portray what they thought was/is the true path humanity was/is following. This extremely negative portrayal of the future is reflected in one of dystopia's major characteristics: the depiction of totalitarian states. As previously explained, these

oppressive societies erase individuality, impose strict rules over their inhabitants, and inflict severe punishments on those dissidents who dare to defy the system.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood is more specifically a female dystopia. The narrator and protagonist of the novel is a woman who is trapped in a totalitarian, patriarchal state. The novel deals with issues such as gender roles and reproductive rights, as well as other issues concerning women's freedom of choice. Many of these gender roles, such as motherhood, are defamiliarized, taken to the extreme, and removed from the control of women. As seen before, many female dystopias portray women-only worlds where definitions of masculinity and femininity are challenged. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* in some ways resembles a women-only world (the Aunts are the ones who instruct other women, the Handmaids become the most important group for in their uteruses lie the survival of the human species, the Commander's Wives control everything that happens in their homes, among others), this hierarchical structure is only an illusion, for men are the ones who have full control over women's lives. The novel, I propose in this work, criticizes the effects of living in a world where women become objectified and are oppressed by men and where gender inequality is reinforced and supported through different discourses in order to manipulate and dominate women.

As demonstrated before, in the Republic of Gilead, women, particularly the Handmaids, are always under the strict surveillance of others, and they are indoctrinated and manipulated both inside and outside the Rachel and Leah center. Indoctrination and manipulation are based on a strong discourse of fear that forces them to accept their role. Besides the discourse of fear, discourses of gender, sexuality, tradition, and religion

function as mass control tools in Gilead. All of these discourses support Gilead's existence and its patriarchal regime and are employed to justify men's superior position and give them the tools to dominate women, as portrayed in the novel. Thus, the Republic of Gilead monitors and controls every aspect of women's lives, particularly their role of bearing children, foments gender inequality, represses female sexuality, and oppresses female subjectivity. All women in Gilead are silenced, classified, objectified, threatened, and used under the deceptive belief that their roles in this society are imperative for everyone's survival. The Handmaids, as shown before, are the ones who experience the worst effects of this system, for their role involves complete submission as well as loss of autonomy, individuality, and sexual freedom.

Some critics have contrasted Offred to other female characters in the novel, namely her mother, Moira, and Ofglen, who, unlike Offred (according to some critics), seem active and willing to act by themselves to resist patriarchy. However, I propose that these three female characters' spirit is annihilated by the end of the novel whereas Offred resists, survives, and challenges the patriarchal discourse that tries to discredit her narration. Unlike these three female characters, who at the end succumb to the patriarchal system, Offred learns to resist till the end when she actually escapes both literally and symbolically through the narration of her story.

Offred's story is full of choices, choices that are denied to her in the Republic of Gilead. Through the oral narration of her story, Offred exercises her voice and decides what to tell about her life and how to tell it. Inside the Republic of Gilead Offred has no voice, for the authorized speech denies her the right to exercise her voice. Outside Gilead, and

two hundred years later, the patriarchal discourse in the Historical Notes also tries to silence her, making of her story an object that male academicians discredit. Despite this, Offred's narration resists, for hers is a story of survival and resilience and one that challenges patriarchal discourse.

Speaking involves choice and decision-making, and despite the obstacles she faces, Offred makes a conscious choice to tell her story. She does it so she can reach others, so that her voice can be heard, and she also does it so she can speak on behalf of those that are still silent inside Gilead. But most importantly, she does it for herself, so her story can survive. Her narration becomes stronger than the patriarchal discourse, for, as demonstrated, her voice is resilient and transgresses boundaries. As an autodiegetic narrator, Offred is in complete control of her story. She starts her journey as part of a collectivity that destroys her individuality and autonomy. She finishes it as a subject that rejects objectification and imposed roles. The recalcitrant forces inside her text—namely intentional gaps, interruptions, micronarratives, open-ending story, different endings, humor, among others—symbolize her resistance to the patriarchal system, for they are active and change throughout the course of the novel. This resistance while telling her story is what allows her to constructs her subjectivity: she is acting, performing instead of just existing.

I started this research with the idea of defending Offred from some critics and the misinterpreted identity they had given her, as mentioned before. At first I thought about arguing that she was able to recover control over her sexuality based on seduction and the love plot with Nick, for her sexuality was the most controlled and oppressed aspect in

Gilead. Nevertheless, I later realized that this was simply one of the many instances of resistance Offred uses to reject the system. There was something bigger than this. I finally understood that her narration was actually more important than her physical escape because through the telling of her story, Offred reconstructs her subjectivity and challenges the patriarchal discourse. I faced different problems until I reached this point because the novel has been analyzed and criticized abundantly, and it was difficult to find a fresh, unique perspective.

In addition, the negative portrayal of both Offred as a character and dystopia as a genre was extremely challenging to refute. I wanted to focus on the positive aspects of the story, but the more I read the more difficult it was for me to keep that hopeful mood. On the one hand, Offred, as mentioned before, was severely criticized by critics who believe she was not a heroine; they argued that she was not doing anything to escape Gilead. On the other hand, because of their nature, dystopias deal with the degeneration of a society and the negative consequences for its citizens, making survival an illusion. Both characterizations are highly negative and seem to lead to despair and hopelessness only. Despite this, I wanted to focus on the possibilities the genre offers. Dystopia serves as a warning, and this is exactly what I wanted to emphasize; the novel warns us about the possible consequences of present actions, and it teaches us that resistance is an intrinsic part of human nature. My work, thus, attempts to surpass this initial negative and shocking portrayal and present Offred as a survivor of the system who is able to resist and teach us the importance of speaking up against patriarchal control.

There is still much to be said about the novel. From a linguistic point of view, the novel may offer an interesting study of the differences between Offred's speech and that of others, particularly for a society that limits its citizens to be silent or to utter memorized expressions in their daily lives. The novel could also be analyzed from a Foucaultian perspective, using other than the Panopticon and biopolitics. This would allow a more specific analysis of the disciplinary society as a normalizing mechanism in the particular context of the society in Gilead, not only from a feminist perspective but taking into account the entire social body.

In the same line of thought, the novel could be analyzed from the field of men and masculinities. Every citizen in Gilead, male or female, is oppressed in one way or another. Even though this work focuses on the effects of totalitarianism and patriarchy on women, men are also affected by both systems because the formation of their own subjectivities is also bound to them. Although most men hold superior positions in Gilead, to analyze the discourses and social constructions that influence men's roles would serve to understand how and why men behave and act the way they do. Finally, the novel offers infinite possibilities for comparative analysis. For instance, the novel could be compared to other dystopias, either female or male dystopias, to study the similarities and differences of both types. In addition, a comparative analysis between early dystopias and more contemporary ones would offer a fascinating survey of the different anxieties of societies at specific points in history and their evolution.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood portrays a reality lived by many women around the world today. Atwood's detailed, graphic description of the consequences of

patriarchy, totalitarianism, and theocracy reflect a reality, not an illusion. The novel finishes with a double warning, one present in Offred's account and the other present in the Historical Notes: patriarchal societies lead to the complete destruction of women's subjectivity by objectifying them. But more importantly, the novel teaches readers a significant lesson: as long as women can resist and speak, they can survive and challenge any patriarchal discourse. As seen before, there are no perfect or ideal societies, and despite the horrible treatment of totalitarian states, there will always be resistance, for this constitutes an intrinsic feature of human beings: mechanisms of survival. Offred survives dystopia, recovers her voice, challenges the patriarchal discourse, and constructs her subjectivity. Her voice is the one that remains after the destruction of the Republic of Gilead, as her speech, even though it was not the authorized one, is the one that survives.

Throughout the process of writing this work, I have learned from Margaret Atwood and Offred. Both have taught me that telling stories is a way to challenge imposed identities and that we can never give up resisting oppression from patriarchal systems. The fact that we never learn Offred's name at the end of the novel is highly symbolic. Our narrator needs to be a nameless narrator, for her name in the time before binds her to her past, and the name Offred in the present is a constant reminder of her status as object. Being nameless gives her the opportunity to start over, to recover agency over her life and decisions, and to reconstruct her subjectivity.

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