

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Taylor J. Boulware for the degree of Master of Arts in English, presented on April 30, 2008.

Title: "Style Upon Style": *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Palimpsest of Genres

Abstract approved:

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Evan Gottlieb

This thesis undertakes an examination of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, as a layering of genres. A futuristic dystopia that imagines late twentieth-century America as having fallen into neo-Puritanism and totalitarianism following widespread infertility and violence, *The Handmaid's Tale* invites contemplation of various forms of fundamentalism, radicalism, and sexual politics. Atwood's use of palimpsestic imagery to convey a layered experience of time extends to the generic complexity of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Using the image of the palimpsest as the controlling metaphor, I survey the ways in which the novel can be read as an historical novel, satire, and postmodern text, exploring the ways in which the novel embodies and extends the defining characteristics of each genre. These genres share the common trait of functioning as social commentary. Thus, an examination of the novel's layering of genres works to provide greater insights into the ways in which Atwood is interrogating the mid-1980s cultural milieu to which she was responding and from which she was writing.

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"Style Upon Style": *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Palimpsest of Genres

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Taylor J. Boulware, Author

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## “Style Upon Style”: *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a Palimpsest of Genres

### Introduction

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly, like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light. (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 3).

In the opening paragraph of Margaret Atwood’s futuristic dystopia *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the narrator Offred describes her time in the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center. In an earlier time, the Center had been a typical American high school; now it is a place where fertile but socially unacceptable women are sent for indoctrination and preparation for their lives as Handmaids in the Republic of Gilead. Published in 1985 and set in the late twentieth-century, *The Handmaid’s Tale* imagines a future in which the backlash against feminism and rise in Christian fundamentalism of the 1980s is followed to a possible logical conclusion. Atwood presents a world in which infertility threatens the continuation of humanity and religious extremists known as the Sons of Jacob have taken over the American government in a violent revolution that thrusts society into a pseudo-Puritan totalitarian regime of intense social control and violence. In the Republic of Gilead, the Bible is not only read literally, but applied to social relations as well. Handmaids are assigned to prominent men in the government whose wives are

infertile; invoking the biblical story of Rachel and her maid Bilhah, the Handmaids are to serve as reproductive vessels for those in power.

The novel is a woman's account of her life as a Handmaid in the home of the Commander, a powerful member of the Gileadean government. Offred lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near the campus of what had previously been Harvard University. Her real name is unknown to the reader, as she, like the other Handmaids, is deprived of her name and forced to take the possessive patronymic of the man to whom she is temporarily assigned. Thus, her name is literally, Of Fred. This naming process for the Handmaids is representative of the severity of misogyny in the Republic of Gilead. The women chosen to be Handmaids live extremely circumscribed lives: it is illegal for them to read or speak to anyone outside their homes, they can only leave the home of their Commander at approved times with other approved Handmaids, and their sole purpose is to maintain the health of their bodies in order to reproduce. They are, as Offred wryly asserts, "two-legged wombs" (136). The Sons of Jacob have enacted a "virtual enslavement of women," reducing them to "mere functions, to mute, replaceable objects" (Bouson 135). They have created a strictly hierarchal society in which women and men are assigned to castes according to their usefulness. Women may be Handmaids, such as Offred; Wives of those in power; Aunts, the unmarried women who oversee the Handmaids; Marthas, unmarried women who perform household chores for those in power; or Econowives, who are married to lower class men who do not merit Marthas or Handmaids. The men are either Commanders, those in charge of the government; Angels, elite soldiers fighting Gilead's wars; or Guardians, lesser soldiers

who provide security to the community as well as perform other menial tasks as assigned. Any of these men could also be a member of the Eyes, the secret police force reminiscent of the Gestapo or the Soviet KGB. Anyone – man or woman – who does not adhere to this scheme is either killed or sent to the Colonies; it is unclear where exactly the Colonies are, but it is known that the men and women sent there live abhorrent lives and are forced to, among other things, clean up nuclear waste.

Ever vigilant in their adherence to Biblical precedent, the leaders of Gilead have devised an elaborate monthly impregnation ceremony for Commander, Wife, and Handmaid. All members of the household, including Rita the cook, Cora the maid, and Nick, the Guardian and chauffeur, gather and listen to the Commander read from the Bible to reinforce the Scriptural authority and righteousness of what they are doing. Then, the Commander, his wife Serena Joy, and Offred go upstairs. In a voice of distant detachment, Offred describes what happens:

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 thighs 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. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge.

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, as that 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)

In their attempts to remove what they deem sinful pleasure from all aspects of life in Gilead, the Sons of Jacob have worked to remove all sexuality from the sex act. One

may ask why the government doesn't simply rely on artificial insemination for reproduction, thereby removing the need for the sex act altogether, but such methods have been deemed unnatural and sacrilegious, and thus illegal.

Offred's admission that she chose to be Handmaid is not surprising, given the alternatives. Once the Sons of Jacob took over the American government, they suspended the Constitution and established martial law based on the Bible. It became illegal for women to work and their finances were seized. All second marriages were declared void, and the children of such marriages became the property of the state. Offred and her husband Luke, who had been married once before, had tried to escape to Canada with their young daughter. In their attempt they were caught, and their daughter was taken and reassigned to another family. Offred does not know what happens to Luke. As a woman who has proven herself to be fertile, Offred has only two choices: to become a Handmaid and live in relative safety, or to be declared an Unwoman, a woman useless to society sent to the Colonies.

While the "Gilead regime effectively robs women of their individual identities and transforms them into replaceable objects in the phallogentric economy," the injustice of Gilead does not only apply to the Handmaids (Bouson 137). All women, and most men, are under the strict control of the government, who maintain power through violence, terror, coercion, and surveillance. The Eyes are everywhere, always watching for the smallest infraction that may prove someone a disbeliever. In her daily walks to town to buy the house's groceries (which are, of course, rationed in this time of war), Offred and her assigned companion Handmaid, Ofglen, pass through military checkpoints

manned by Guardians; everyone must live under strict adherence to Biblical law, as all forms of secularism have been banned. Offred and Ofglen often go to look at the Wall, the brick enclosure around the university where traitors to the Republic are hanged as a public warning. When the reader first encounters this, six male doctors have been hung. The placards around their necks that show their crime reveal that they were abortionists in the time before. Offred notes, “these men, 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).

The Republic of Gilead is a brutal and treacherous police state, but like every police state based on extremism of belief, there are those in power who do not always adhere to the policies enacted by the regime. The two people who wield the most power over Offred – the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy – each entice her to break the rules for their own benefit. The Commander, lonely and bored, pushes Offred into a forbidden friendship that begins with furtive late-night games of Scrabble, and escalates into a visit to a secret brothel. Serena Joy, desperate for the power and status that comes with having a child, commits heresy by suggesting to Offred that the Commander may be infertile and arranges for Offred to sleep with Nick. Offred agrees, and unbeknownst to Serena, after the first night of approved fornication, begins a secret affair with Nick. In addition to these illicit activities, Offred also learns that Ofglen, her shopping partner, is part of Mayday, an underground resistance movement that works to help women escape the regime. Thus, Offred’s life becomes not only one of intense oppression and loss, but of dangerous secrets as well.

Offred's story comes to an end after two horrific events. At a women's Salvaging, a public execution, two Handmaids and a Wife are executed – hung for unknown reasons. Following this, the Handmaids are required to participate in a Particicution, a form of state-sanctioned mob violence. A man, badly beaten, is brought to the Handmaids, and they are told that he has raped two Handmaids at gunpoint, one of them pregnant. The Handmaids, repressed, wrathful, and aching for a way to release their rage, descend on the man and beat him to death. Offred is shocked when she sees Ofglen rush forward and give the man three swift kicks to the head, knocking him unconscious. In the mayhem, she tells Offred “[h]e wasn't a rapist at all, he was a political. He was one of ours. Put him out of his misery. Don't you know what they're doing to him?” (280).

That same day, after returning to the Commander's house and leaving to do the day's shopping, Offred learns that Ofglen hanged herself as the Eyes came to arrest her. She is immediately replaced with a new Handmaid, a new Ofglen. If this were not terrifying enough, Offred returns to the Commander's house to find Serena Joy incensed with anger. She silently wonders, “For which of my many sins am I accused?” (287). Offred soon learns that Serena Joy has discovered her secret liaisons with the Commander; like a child, she is sent to her room to await punishment. Offred's tale ends with Nick coming to retrieve her from her room; he tells her that the Eyes coming for her are members of Mayday, and that they will help her. Distrustful, but left with no choice, she goes with them. As she leaves the house for the last time, Offred learns that Serena Joy has not called the Eyes, and suspects that her friendship with the subversive Ofglen

has been the cause of her arrest. Thus ends Offred's narrative of her life as a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead; she enters the ominous black van of the Eyes, not knowing if torture, death, or freedom awaits her.

In a fascinating narrative shift, however, Atwood does not end here. In an epilogue titled "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*," Atwood presents "a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies...held at the University of Denay, Nunavit, on June 25, 2195" (299). What follows is a lengthy speech by Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, titled "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*" (300). We learn from Professor Pieixoto that "The Handmaid's Tale" – what we have just read – was, in its original form, a series of recordings on cassette tapes found in a footlocker in a house in Bangor, Maine. We learn that Offred did indeed escape the Commander's home successfully and went underground, where she recorded her tale. The specifics of her life after her escape – was she eventually caught? Was she pregnant when she left? Did Nick betray her? Did she ever learn the fate of Luke or her daughter? – are unknown.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is an absorbing and fascinating novel that is extremely poignant for its emotional resonance and chilling plausibility. Both of these qualities invite further analysis of this complex work by one of the most esteemed and prolific writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is an inherently political novel that serves to caution its readers against complacency in the face of rising trends of totalitarianism and fundamentalism. The novel also deserves attention for the ways in which it intervenes in the futuristic dystopian tradition that has been a genre typically

utilized by male writers. While Atwood openly acknowledges the influences of Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, she also clearly wishes to turn the tables on those canonical texts. As she writes in the essay "George Orwell: Some Personal Connections," "the majority of dystopias – Orwell's included – have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. When women have appeared in them, they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime.... I wanted to try a dystopia from a female point of view" (291). In addition to these literary impetuses to study the novel, there are political and social reasons as well. It is important to acknowledge that we are currently living in the time period that Atwood imagined for the Republic of Gilead; given recent political trends towards extremism and religious fundamentalism in our post-9/11 world, it seems necessary to reexamine a novel that so thoroughly examines the implications of these trends.

There are several ways in which one can explore *The Handmaid's Tale*. Given the novel's obvious political leanings, much work has been done in the realm of feminism and feminist criticism. Notable contributions to this field include Shirley Neuman's "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*"; Fiona Tolan's "Feminist Utopias and Questions of Liberty: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as Critique of Second Wave Feminism"; Lucy M. Freibert's "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*"; Magali Cornier Michael's *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse*; and Coral Ann Howells' "Science Fiction in the Feminine: *The Handmaid's Tale*. Other theorists have focused on the narrative structure of the novel; these studies include J. Brooks Bouson's

*Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*; Nancy A. Walker's *The Disobedient Writer*; and Lorene M. Birden's "Sortir de L'Auberge": Strategies of (False) Narration in Atwood and Triolet." There is also significant work being done on *The Handmaid's Tale* as it fits into Atwood's larger body of work as a Canadian writer, including Linda Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern* and Herb Wylies' *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*. The rich and varied nature of criticism of *The Handmaid's Tales* testifies to the novel's multi-faceted nature.

Atwood herself offers a way to interpret the novel in its very first paragraph, with the use of the word *palimpsest* when she describes the gymnasium where Offred and the other Handmaids slept while being indoctrinated into the Republic:

Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light. (3)

Offred imagines the generations of teenagers who danced in this gymnasium that once glittered with light and music, an image that lies in sharp contrast to the gym's use under the Gileadean government. By using the word *palimpsest*, Atwood is suggesting a layering of the past and present. A palimpsest is a piece of parchment from which the original writing has been partially erased or otherwise removed in order for a new text to be written. In extended use, it has come to mean any object or place that holds traces of its history and its previous incarnations. What is important about a palimpsest is that the previous text is never fully removed; it always leaves traces that complicate the 'new' text. Palimpsestic images abound in *The Handmaid's Tale* as Offred describes her

present life in the Republic and her past life in 1970s and 1980s America. Offred's continual layering of the present with the past works to establish the palimpsestic effect of the narrative. These moments are evoked by what Offred sees and experiences in her life in Gilead such as when she considers Serena Joy's name: "what a stupid name. It's like something you'd put on your hair, in the other time, the time before, to straighten it" (45); and when she goes to the doctor and describes the medical symbol blazoned across the folding screen: it has "a gold Eye painted on it, with a snake-twined sword upright beneath it.... The snakes and the sword are bits of broken symbolism left over from the time before" (60). And later, when remembering her time at the Rachel and Leah Center, formerly a high school: "on the top of my desk there are initials, carved into the wood, and dates. The initials are sometimes in two sets, joined by the word *loves*. *J.H. loves B.P. 1954*.... These habits of former times appear to me now, lavish, decadent almost" (113). These brief examples are merely a few out of the many moments in which the layering of time is clearly drawn. As the past keeps pushing into Offred's present, the palimpsestic effect of the novel continually reasserts itself. "The Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*" is perhaps the most interesting use of the palimpsest, as, in a delightful twist, we learn that Offred recorded her tale over music on cassette tapes. As Professor Darcy explains, "there were some thirty tapes in the collection altogether, with varying proportions of music to spoken word.... There were, for instance, four tapes entitled 'Elvis Presley's Golden Years,' three of 'Folk Songs of Lithuania,' three of 'Boy George Takes It Off,' and two of 'Mantovani's Mellow Strings'" (302). Offred's entire tale, then – not just moments within it – is a physical palimpsest. Furthermore, "The Historical

Notes” as a whole operate as a kind of palimpsest as well, as they are yet another layer of Offred’s tale through which the reader must negotiate in order to make sense of the novel.

In addition to the palimpsestic layering of experience and imagery that runs throughout the text, *The Handmaid’s Tale* can also be read as a palimpsest of genres. It is an intricate, multi-layered text that simultaneously operates as historical novel, a satire, and a postmodern fiction. By examining the ways in which these genres are functioning concomitantly in the novel, we can gain greater insights into this significant work. In Chapter One, I explore the ways in which this futuristic novel operates as historical fiction and how fiction incorporates history and historical thinking, focusing on the ways in which Atwood incorporates particular historical moments into the Republic of Gilead and the method by which she ultimately casts Offred’s tale as a historical one. Chapter Two explores the novel as satire; while *The Handmaid’s Tale* is most definitely a cautionary novel that operates as a serious warning against the dangers of totalitarianism and fundamentalism, it also functions satirically to criticize various elements of late twentieth century society. The targets of Atwood’s satire go beyond religious fundamentalists, as the novel contains criticisms of radical feminism and academia as well. Chapter Three undertakes a reading of the novel as a postmodern work, exploring Offred’s repeated undermining of her own authorial authority and continual remaking of her identity that operate to subvert straightforward and traditional notions of truth, identity, and narrative reliability.

Historical novel, satire, postmodern fiction: all three genres are at work in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. A historicized reading of the novel with an eye towards the ways in

which these genres are operating will reveal its full complexity; by peeling back the layers of the palimpsest that Atwood has created, we stand to gain important insights into this tremendously important work by one of our greatest contemporary writers.

## Chapter One: *The Handmaid's Tale* as Historical Novel

Although a futuristic dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* can be read as a historical novel for the ways in which it negotiates the past, the present, and the future. The most basic definition of a historical novel is one that takes place in a time prior to the author's present, but as we shall see, successful historical novels are more much more complex. As a genre, the historical novel has appeared in various incarnations since Sir Walter Scott popularized the form in the early nineteenth-century. In the latter half of the twentieth-century, historical fiction has increased in popularity and has taken on a renewed aura of importance. David Cowart, author of *History and the Contemporary Novel* (1989), argues that in a post World War II age, "writers sensitive to the lateness of the historical hour and capable of exploiting technical innovations in the novel" are producing "new historical fiction [that] seems to differ from that of calmer times" (1). In an era that has witnessed atomic warfare, the Holocaust, countless genocides and atrocities, as well as widespread social oppression of all kinds, a more intense historical novel has emerged; "a sense of urgency – sometimes even an air of desperation – pervades the historical novel since mid-century, for its author probes the past to account for a present that grows increasingly chaotic" (1). By imagining a past, writers of historical fiction seek to understand the present. The most interesting historical novels are those that function as complex meditations that offer insights into the writer's present, as well as those that question the nature of what we think of as "history." How then, does *The Handmaid's Tale*, a novel that imagines a possible future, operate as a historical novel? Cowart distinguishes four types of historical novels, one of which he calls "The

Way It Will Be – fictions whose authors reverse history to contemplate the future”; he argues that these fictions are an

exercise in reverse historical thinking [that] commonly extrapolate the future from the present. But the most sophisticated of these fictions...depict a future at once growing out of the present and ironically reflecting the past, for authors who meditate on ‘things to come’ often rely on extensive historical knowledge” (8 – 9).

And so it is in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Although Atwood proposes a future for American society, it is a future based on not only the mid-1980s cultural milieu from which she was writing, but on American colonial history and Biblical history as well. She incorporates all of these in order to provide a greater understanding of both American history and the American present she was observing in the early 1980s. As she has asserted several times since the novel’s publication, “there is nothing in the book that hasn’t already happened.... All the things described in the book, people have already done to one another” (qtd. in Goddard 8).

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is not Atwood’s only foray into the historical novel genre. In 1996 she published *Alias Grace*, a traditional historical novel that fictionalizes a sensational 1843 double murder in Canada. Thus, when recent scholars discuss Atwood and her interaction with this particular genre, most focus on this text. In late 1996, Atwood gave a lecture titled “In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction,”<sup>1</sup> in which she discussed the nature of history and historical fiction, also with a focus on *Alias Grace*. However, her insights into the form can also be applied to *The Handmaid’s Tale* in order to undertake an analysis of that text as a historical novel.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally delivered as the Bronfman Lecture, Ottawa, November 1996. It is reprinted in a collection of Atwood’s nonfiction, *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose 1983 – 2005*.

When discussing the relationship of an author to his or her work, Atwood asserts:

We have to write out of who we are and when we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may. As Robertson Davies has remarked “we all belong to our own time, and there is nothing whatever that we can do to escape from it. Whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set in a past age.” (“In Search” 159)

While Atwood cites this comment as a way to situate novels in which the writer fictionalizes the past, the same can be said of novels set in an imagined future; indeed, all fictions that imagine a future do so with a basis in the moments from which they’re written. Thus, historical novels often function in the same ways as futuristic novels: they are creations of the writer’s present, regardless of the time or place in which they are set.

When elaborating on this idea, Atwood discusses Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, which takes place in Puritan New England:

*The Scarlet Letter* is not, of course, seventeenth-century in any way the Puritans would have recognized.... It’s a novel that uses a seventeenth-century English Colonial setting for the purposes of a newly forged nineteenth-century American republic. And I think that’s part of the interest for writers and readers of Canadian historical fiction, now: by taking a long, hard look backward, we place ourselves. (“In Search” 170)

While Atwood’s primary concern here is Canadian history and Canadian historical fiction, her comments are true for all historical fiction. By imagining and exploring a past, writers are attempting to understand the present; they are trying to figure out how we got to where we are. A survey of the historical scope of *The Handmaid’s Tale* reveals that it is a novel that imagines a future that is clearly based on the present as well as the past in an effort to comment upon and explore both.

*“Our ancestors”*: *The Sons of Jacob, Puritans, and Totalitarianism*

In the creation of the Republic of Gilead, Atwood is drawing on America’s colonial Puritan past. In an interview with Victor Lévy-Beaulieu, she asserts that “countries continue they way they began; they rearrange the symbols and structures, but something remains of their origins” (Atwood, *Two Solitudes* 72). Thus, the neo-Puritanism of the Republic of Gilead is a reinvigoration of colonial America. It is a testament to the historical nature of *The Handmaid’s Tale* that although set in the future, when the reader steps into the Republic of Gilead, she feels as if she is stepping in to the past. The color-coded habits that the women are required to wear – long, concealing gowns with veils and headdresses to hide their face and hair – evoke the fashions of a past era. The rules circumscribing women’s lives are also recognizably archaic. It is illegal for women to read, and those in power fear this so much that even the names of stores are reduced to pictures on signs: “they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone” (*HT* 25). Even the placards hung on the bodies of the executed to let people know their crimes are drawn pictures. In addition to being denied jobs and money, women in Gilead cannot even testify or act as informants on their own: “evidence from a single woman is no longer admissible” (33). The setting of the novel is crucial as well, as Boston and Cambridge saw the flowering of Puritan ideals in early America. As she and Ofglen walk by an aged church that has been transformed into a museum, Offred describes what one finds there: “Inside it you can see paintings, of women in long somber dresses, their hair covered by white caps, and upright men, darkly clothed and unsmiling. Our ancestors” (31). The

irony here is quite apparent, as Offred has not only described her Puritan ancestors, but her modern society as well. Atwood is quite clearly nodding to the Puritan forbearers of American society and acknowledging their role in Gileadean society.

These examples of Puritan society as an elemental aspect of Gilead are reinforced by other more subtle allusions. Early in the novel, when Offred and Ofglen first walk past the Wall and see the hanging bodies of executed doctors, Offred contemplates their presence: “what we are supposed to feel towards these bodies is hatred and scorn. This isn’t what I feel. These bodies hanging on the Wall are time travelers, anachronisms. They’ve come here from the past (33). While on the one hand referring to the fact that these doctors – men who safely and legally performed abortions – are echoes of the time immediately preceding Gilead, Atwood is also reaching farther back to other histories – moments in time when those who were considered enemies of the regime were publicly executed as an example to others, thus emphasizing the historical nature of the narrative. With this and many other moments in the novel, one only has to remember the nature of Puritan ideology to see its reverberations in Gilead; as Atwood says in her interview with Lévy-Beaulieu, “the United States was founded by seventeenth-century Puritans. It wasn’t a democracy then, but a very strict theocracy, especially with respect to sex” (72). The severe codes of behavior, the public executions, the criminalization of anything regarded by those in power as heretical, are all hallmarks of The Republic of Gilead, just as they were all hallmarks of Puritanism in early America.

In another historical move, Atwood infuses the Republic of Gilead with Biblical allusions. The Sons of Jacob, like their Puritan forbearers, base their society on the Old

Testament. The foundation of their sexual organization – the assigning of Handmaids to those in power – is directly taken from the Biblical precedents of the Old Testament patriarchs. Sarah gave her handmaid Hagar to Abraham, Rachel gave Bilhah to Jacob, and her sister Leah, also married to Jacob, offered her handmaid Zelpha up for procreation (Freibert 282). The children the handmaids bore were considered legitimate offspring of the marriage, with the birth mother merely a vessel, and so it is in Gilead. We learn after Ofwarren gives birth that she will be allowed to breast feed the child for a time, and then transferred to another post, “to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn” (127). The Old Testament allusions do not end with the use of Handmaids. Required greetings bear Biblical messages: “Blessed be the fruit,” “May the Lord open,” the Handmaids repeat to each other (19). At the Rachel and Leah Center, the Handmaids are continually berated with Scripture to remind them that their sacrifice is for a holy purpose. The impregnation Ceremony is preceded with lofty readings from the Bible by the Commander. As Offred describes, “It’s the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.* Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center: *Give me children, or else I die*” (88). The strict adherence to Biblical sanction and repetition serves to perpetuate the supposed infallibility of the regime. By basing their dictatorship on religion, the Sons of Jacob leave no room for dissent, for in a theocracy, “it becomes impossible to disagree with the system without being accused of blasphemy” (*Two Solicitudes* 72). And in this totalitarian regime, to be blasphemous subjects one to torture and death.

In her essay “Writing Utopia,” Atwood discusses the historical basis of Gilead as not only American Puritanism, but also the history of dictatorships in general.

The future society proposed in *The Handmaid’s Tale* has the form of a theocracy...on the principle that no society ever strays completely far from its roots.... [T]he most potent forms of dictatorship have always been those that have imposed tyranny in the name of religion...[because] what is needed for a really good tyranny is an unquestionable idea or authority. Political disagreement is political disagreement; but political disagreement with a *theocracy* is heresy.... It was in the light of history that the American constitutionalists in the eighteenth-century separated church from state. It is also in the light of history that my leaders in *The Handmaid’s Tale* recombine them. (97)

Thus, it is apparent that Atwood had an explicitly historical perspective in mind when writing *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In the words of Professor Pieixoto, Gilead was successful because “its genius was synthesis” (307). The Gileadeans’ ability to incorporate Puritan and Biblical ideals with more modern historical precedents of domination proves to be their most important skill. The same can be said of Atwood: the synthesis of historical tyrannies and theocracies that she creates works to make *The Handmaid’s Tale* profoundly historical in scope.

*“The time before”: Gilead and 1980s America*

In addition to the synthesis of historical precedents for The Republic of Gilead, Atwood looks to her own cultural moment for the creation of this future dystopia. Central to the Sons of Jacob’s rise to power is the rise of Christian fundamentalism and the feminist backlash of 1980s America. What would happen, Atwood asks, if the people behind these movements were to gain control of the American government?

Furthermore, Atwood draws on reports of an apparent fertility crisis as the basis for the

Sons of Jacob's rise to power. As she states in "Writing Utopia," "true dictatorships do not come in good times. They come in bad times, when people are ready to give up some of their freedoms to someone – anyone – who can take control and promise them better times" (98). This phenomenon is reminiscent of Hitler and Mussolini, whose rise to power was facilitated by the dire social and economic devastation caused by World War One. With a keen attention to history and the trends of her own time, Atwood creates The Republic of Gilead. She "imagines the end of the United States of America as rooted in the fanaticism of one set of its inhabitants (the Sons of Jacob), the complicity of another set (the wives, the Aunts), and in the complacency of the rest: the Handmaid and her unvigilant sisters" (Cowart 109). Cowart goes on to argue that the severely circumscribed freedom in The Republic of Gilead does not only affect its female inhabitants; men, while not forced into sexual reproduction like the Handmaids, are nonetheless victims of tyranny as well. Those who are not in power – the majority of men, of course – are subject to the whims of the government. Men such as Luke, Offred's husband who is not useful to the Republic, are most likely killed; other men are forced into government and military service, to be assigned wives as the Sons of Jacob see fit.

While it is important to acknowledge that Atwood's dystopia affects the lives of men as well, it is the lives of women that are the primary concern of the novel. Women, who have been scapegoats for social problems for centuries, are once again the scapegoats for the Gileadean regime. The most fundamental problem The Republic faces, the problem that they seized upon in order to gain power – infertility – is blamed

on women. When Serena Joy suggests to Offred that the Commander may be infertile, she is committing heresy. According to the ideology of Gilead, “it’s only women who can’t, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective” (*HT* 204). Gilead’s blaming of women for infertility is part of a larger cultural trend of misogyny that developed in some quarters following the advances gained by the Second Wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As a keen cultural observer, Atwood was “aware of the fragility of the newly acquired rights and equalities of women: of the opposition to these rights and equalities in many quarters, of the many places and ways in which these gains were threatened or actively eroded” (Neuman 858 – 859).

In her landmark, Pulitzer Prize-winning 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, journalist Susan Faludi explores the nature of 1980s reactions against feminism and women. An exhaustive study of popular culture, politics, media, economics, and social trends, *Backlash* argues that patriarchal American society, threatened by the notion of equality for women, operates in myriad ways to reverse the gains of feminism. One of the most blatantly false conspiracies of the backlash was the purported “infertility epidemic” amongst career women. A 1982 *New England Journal of Medicine* article reported that women “between the ages of thirty-one and thirty-five...stood a nearly 40 percent chance of being infertile” (Faludi 42). In addition to the study, the *Journal* published a three-page editorial, “exhorting women to ‘reevaluate their goals’ and have their babies before they started careers” (43). This study created a whirlwind of press coverage, with the statistic seeming to grow with every new mention; one self-help book asserted that women in their thirties “faced a ‘shocking 68 percent’

chance of infertility – and promptly faulted the feminists, who had failed to advise women of the biological drawbacks of a successful career” (43). Faludi points out several flaws with this so called “infertility epidemic” that captivated the attention of so many in the early 1980s. She argues that “in seeking the source” of the supposed epidemic, “the media and medical establishment considered only professional women, convinced that the answer was to be found in the rising wealth and independence of a middle-class female population” (44). Reports of vast infertility amongst middle-class, working women continued to abound, even though a 1985 US National Center for Health Statistics study reported that “American women between thirty and thirty-four faced only a 13.6 percent, not 40 percent, chance of being infertile” (44). The researchers that promoted the infertility scare also failed to point out that the US fertility rate was declining from the anomalously high birth rates of the 1950s – the birth of the post-World War II Baby Boom generation (49 – 50). Faludi also points out that the “infertility rates of young black women tripled between 1965 and 1982,” yet this phenomenon was not given media attention (46). In other words, because these women were not seen to be beneficiaries of the feminist movement, their infertility could not be used as an attack against it, and thus was not an issue for concern. Furthermore, little medical or media attention was given to another possible infertility problem, that of male infertility. The issue is clear: medical and media attention given to the supposed infertility of middle-class, professional, predominantly white women was a symptom of a larger cultural trend that pervaded 1980s America. It was a tool of the backlash movement in an attempt to manipulate women who had made gains of equality and independence as a result of the

feminist movement. Antifeminists were hoping to scare women back into the home by pushing propaganda that told them that their career goals would prevent them from having a family, amongst other dire consequences that were damaging society. Women were also harangued for choosing to have few or no children, and recently legalized abortion was also blamed for failures to conceive, although study after study proved otherwise (44 – 50).

While Faludi argues that the widespread reports of an “infertility epidemic” were false creations of a reactionary media and medical field controlled by those with antifeminist sentiments, Atwood’s utilization of such trends is nonetheless valid. One may argue that her proposed infertility epidemic that allows the Sons of Jacob to come to power in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is evidence that like so many others, Atwood was duped into believing the biased claims of the medical and media establishment. This, of course, seems highly unlikely; however, whether or not she took these reports at face value, Atwood’s use of the purported epidemic reveals the power of the feminist backlash. The attack on women, regardless of legitimacy of its claims, was powerful enough to suggest the plausibility of a regime based on a supposed infertility epidemic. If people believed in it, whether or not it was true, then wouldn’t it be possible for a fanatical group to take advantage of that belief? Furthermore, close attention to *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Atwood’s other writings suggests that the infertility epidemic she supposes is not linked to women’s independence, like the antifeminist reactionaries propose. In “Writing Utopia,” she asserts that the causes of infertility that leads to the revolution in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a result of “widespread environmental catastrophe” caused by

“chemical and radiation damage” that is “happening already” (98). In the “Historical Notes” section of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Professor Pieixoto discusses the possible causes of the declining Caucasian birthrate in the Pre-Giledean period:

Need I remind you that this was the age of the R-strain syphilis and also of the infamous AIDS epidemic, which, once they spread to the population at large, eliminated many young sexually active people from the reproductive pool? Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to leakages from chemical- and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites, of which there were many thousands, both legal and illegal – in some instances these materials were simply dumped into the sewage system – and the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays. (304)

As his comments demonstrate, the causes of the fertility crisis that gives rise to the Giledean regime are not related to women’s gains brought by the feminist movement. This is also affirmed earlier, when Offred is attending the ceremonial birth of another Handmaid; she remembers what they were told at the Rachel and Leah Center about the possibility of giving birth to an “Unbaby” or a “shredder”, a child with a deformity:

The chances are one in four, we learned that at the Center. The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. (112)

It is clear here that Atwood is not suggesting that women who delay childbirth for the sake of careers are to blame for the infertility epidemic that helped give rise to The Republic of Gilead. Rather, the mishandling of powerful chemicals – everything from insecticides to chemical warfare – and the inability to adequately treat sexually transmitted diseases are the causes. It is the irresponsibility of those in power in the pre-Giledean period – the 1980s – that have caused the infertility epidemic. And Atwood

clearly suggests that sterility affects men as well as women, although it is treasonous to suggest so in Gilead. Atwood is responding to the fertility scare of the 1980s perpetuated by antifeminist reactionaries with the creation of a totalitarian regime that blames women for being “stubbornly closed, damaged, [and] defective,” when in fact those in power are to blame for creating devastating environmental conditions. Atwood is negotiating the effects of the backlash; drawing on vast historical precedents of blaming the victim and women being used as societal scapegoats, she proposes a possible logical extension of the “infertility epidemic.” In Gilead, it is clear that environmental problems are the cause of infertility and genetic deformities, but those in power refuse that cause because it would implicate them as well as undercut their justification for the sexual and social tyranny they have established. It is not far-fetched to argue that Atwood is suggesting a similar phenomenon was at work in 1980s America; reluctant to admit to the actual causes of increasing infertility and looking for a way in which to reverse the gains of the feminist movement, the backlash manipulators set the blame on women. Thus, *The Handmaid’s Tale* works to “relentlessly expos[e] the misogyny underlying present-day culture” (Bouson 139).

Coupled with the infertility scare of pre-Gileadean society that contributes to the Sons of Jacob’s rise to power is the ascendancy of the “agenda articulated during the 1980s by America’s fundamentalist Christian Right” (Neuman 857). It is from this cultural phenomenon that Atwood pulls the most plausible and frightening aspect of her dystopian future. When searching for a group to lead the totalitarian future that she had in mind, Atwood had only to look to the rise of Christian fundamentalism and its attack

on feminism and women's rights that pervaded the 1980s in the US. Faced with an increasingly secularized country and women's equality, which they perceived to be a threat to "traditional values," Christian evangelists and political conservatives such as Paul Weyrich, Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, Pat Robertson, and Rush Limbaugh launched a war on feminism. Calling themselves "pro-family," these men, who managed to strongly influence American politicians, cast feminism as the ultimate evil; in the words of Falwell, feminists had launched a "satanic attack on the home" (qtd. in Faludi 244). In a letter to his congregation, Pat Robertson wrote that "feminists encourage women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians" (qtd. in Neuman 860). "Femi-Nazis" abounded, they said, to destroy the American way of life and to pervert the country with open sexuality, contraception, abortion, gender-bending, and the "downgrading of the male or father role in the traditional family" (Weyrich, qtd. in Faludi 244). Attempting to add authority to their agenda, they based their sexism in Biblical terms, a move taken to the extreme by the Sons of Jacob in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The fundamentalists' methods of attack were at once brutal and ingenious; by infiltrating Washington, they were able to introduce legislation that sought to turn back the clock on women's rights, including attempts to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and to revoke the Equal Pay Act, as well as the revocation of laws protecting battered wives from their husbands; they even went so far as to try to deny federal funding for schools that used textbooks "portraying women in nontraditional roles" (Faludi 247 – 248). In 1980, the New Right struck a major victory with the election of Ronald Reagan. Under his administration, the number of women elected and

appointed to political office declined; “one third of all federal budget cuts ... came from programs that served mainly women, even though these programs represented only 10 percent of the federal budget” (Neuman 859 – 860). There was a vast rise in sexually related murders and domestic violence, and the federal government responded by defeating bills to fund domestic violence shelters. In 1981, it closed the Office of Domestic Violence, a division that had only been opened two years earlier. The Equal Rights Amendment was defeated, and the debate over abortion turned away from a discussion of women’s rights and towards an adherence to the rights of the fetus (Neuman 859 – 860).

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the New Right’s war on feminism was their ability to induce women to work against women’s rights. Phyllis Schlafly, Connie Marshner, and Beverly LaHaye all pleaded with women to return to the home and submit to their husbands, to return to the “natural” order of things. The irony of this strategy is that these women, in order to become the public female face of the New Right antifeminist movement, embodied feminist ideals. They were highly educated, independent, professional women whose husbands helped with the household duties while they were at the office lobbying against women’s rights and legislation intended to help mothers (Faludi 265 – 267). “The New Right women were voicing antifeminist views – while internalizing the message of the women’s movement and quietly incorporating its tenets of self-determination, equality, and freedom of choice into their private behavior” (267). Serena Joy, whom Offred recognizes as a formerly famous New Right personality, embodies this phenomenon. Offred remarks, “Her speeches were

about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay at home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead" (*HT* 45). Aunt Lydia, the leader of the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center where Offred is indoctrinated into life as a Handmaid, is also clearly an incarnation of New Right women. Echoing the statements of women like Beverly LaHaye, founder of the lobbyist group Concerned Women for America, Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids: "we were a society dying ... of too much choice" (25). Because women had been granted freedom to choose the path of their lives, the ideology of the New Right (and of course, Gilead) argues, society as we know it is disintegrating. Lydia, also in the vein of New Right ideology, asserts that violence against women in the pre-Gileadean period was a direct result of women's 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 women of Gilead are told that they have sacrificed their dangerous freedom to choose their own lives for the safety of freedom from rapists, kidnappers, and the unhappiness of childlessness. If this seems melodramatic and something spun from Atwood's overactive imagination, one only has to look again to New Right women, who repeatedly argued that "changes in women's status" had left them "unprotected" and were preventing women from fulfilling their ordained destinies to be mothers (Faludi 263). Much like the ideology that perpetuates the Gileadean regime, "the religious trappings" of the New Right "foster the idea that the primary purpose of the system is to protect women, while the actual purpose is to control them and reinforce the notion that their biology is their destiny" (Freibert 283–284).

Perhaps the best motivation for the hypocritical participation of women in the New Right's war on women can be found in the "Historical Notes" of *The Handmaid's Tale*. When discussing the Aunts of Gilead – women who worked to train and control the Handmaids – Professor Pieixoto posits that the women who volunteered for this service did so not only due to a belief in "traditional values," but for the "benefits they might thereby acquire. When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting" (308). One is reminded again of Aunt Lydia. At the Salvaging, Offred notes that Lydia, the leader of the proceedings, flaunts her power and status over the other women – even the Wives – by reveling in the fact that she is allowed to read: "Aunt Lydia rummages in her pocket, produces a crumpled piece of paper. This she takes an undue length of time to unfold and scan. She's rubbing our noses in it, letting us know exactly who she is, making us watch her as she silently reads, flaunting her prerogative" (275). Witnessing the attack on women that the New Right evangelists were waging, it is not surprising that many women chose to participate as a way to maintain a modicum of power and control over their own lives; their careers were not in jeopardy, they rightly figured, if they preached the message the men wanted to hear. Like Aunt Lydia, the women of the New Right played by the men's antifeminist rules and were able to maintain some degree of power and status while other women were being persecuted. They could maintain power by "working to prevent all other women from having that same opportunity" (Faludi 268). Again invoking historical precedents, not only for what she sees happening in 1980s America, but also for what she creates in the Republic of Gilead, Atwood has Professor Pieixoto explain this phenomenon:

the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through the women themselves. For this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group. (308)

It seems that the leaders of the New Right evangelical movement were astutely aware of this historical trend as well. By drafting women into their war against feminism, they effectively worked to curtail the women's movement and create a society that was becoming increasingly hostile to women.

Atwood incorporates this hostility into an astute analysis of the historical moment she observed in the United States. In a flashback to the beginnings of the Gileadean revolution, Offred remembers the feelings of despair and confusion when women's finances were seized (to be turned over to their husbands or male relatives) and when it became illegal for women to work. "It's outrageous, one woman said, but without belief. What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?" (177). The answer to Offred's question is twofold. On the one hand, the feminist backlash that was increasingly blaming women for society's problems is responsible for these feelings. Women who chose to delay or forgo marriage and childbearing for the sake of careers were made to feel unfeminine and guilty. In a reactionary society led by those threatened by sexual equality, women were repeatedly being told – both blatantly and subtly – that they were the cause of not only their own unhappiness, but the ills of society as well. Thus, it is not hard to imagine that in Offred's world, as the Sons of Jacob rapidly reduced women to mere objects, women were made to feel that it was treatment they deserved. Women were told that they were responsible for the problems, and, therefore, they must bear the

punishment. That, of course, is a hallmark of patriarchy: to make women feel that they are not worthy of equality. Atwood has her finger on the pulse of the backlash that dominated American media and politics in the 1980s, and she is able to poignantly capture its devastating effects. This is again emphasized by Offred's dismissal of feminism in the time before Gilead; like so many women who have come of age after the intensity of Second Wave feminism, Offred believed that she didn't need it. She had had access to higher education, a decent job, and was able to live on her own before marrying a man who helped with the housework. In a flashback, she remembers her mother, a feminist activist, admonishing her for her lack of feminist sentiment: "As for you, she'd say to me, you're just a backlash. Flash in the pan. History will absolve me" (121). Here, Atwood is commenting on the lack of vigilance on the part of women as the backlash gained force; by failing to be activists and by falsely believing that there was no longer a need for feminism, women such as Offred were complicit in the backlash that allowed the Gileadean regime to come to power. This too, then, suggests a possible answer to Offred's question of "what was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?". By failing to embrace feminism, by assuming that equality was already achieved, women such as Offred also failed to pay attention or to care about rising trends of misogyny, a failure that led to dire consequences.

What this survey of the backlash against feminism in the 1980s demonstrates is the legitimate basis for the imagined future state of Gilead; Atwood is "envisioning an appalling future already implicit in the contemporary world" (Davidson 113). In the most traditional sense, Atwood's extensive use of her present moment might belie the notion

that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be read as a historical novel, especially if one holds tightly to the notion that a historical novel is merely one in which the action takes place prior to the writer's present. However, given a more complex definition of the genre as one that seeks to explore the writer's present by incorporating a historical ethos, it becomes clear that Atwood not only fully embraces the historical novel genre, but complicates and extends it as well. Her synthesis of various historical moments and the moment from which she was writing in order to create a potential future works as a fascinating meditation on history and on the historical novel genre. History and historical fiction, in the hands of Atwood, become more than just what came before. Both are inextricably linked to the times in which they are written and the times that follow. A reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a historical novel reveals that the genre involves more than just a plot that takes place prior to the author's time. Atwood demonstrates that truly effective and successful historical novels, even when they are positing a possible future, push us to think about what history is made of and how our own cultural moments are inherently historical.

*"The Goddess of History": The Historical Notes*

The Republic of Gilead is just one aspect of the future that Atwood imagines. Following Offred's narrative, which ends with her arrest by Eyes who may or may not be members of the underground resistance movement Mayday, the reader is presented with "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*." Situated in northern Canada in 2195, the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies is a society reminiscent of North American culture prior to the Gileadean revolution. This conference of academics includes men

and women, and their method of speech and nature of historical inquiry suggest that the power of the Sons of Jacob was not long lasting, nor did it spread beyond the United States. This second future is an intriguing epilogue to Offred's tale. On the one hand, it offers the reader hope: Offred did escape Gilead, at least long enough to record her tale, and the Gileadean hold on the United States was short-lived. However, upon closer inspection, there is more to this addendum. Although the "Historical Notes" section primarily function as a satire (an issue to be discussed in the next chapter), it is relevant to a discussion of the novel as historical fiction. Not only does the inclusion of this second future cast the first future Atwood has presented – the Republic of Gilead – as the past (thus, in another way making Offred's tale historical), it speaks to the nature of history, historical witnessing, and the practice of collecting and interpreting historical documents. Offred's narrative has become one such document: something to be transcribed and analyzed by those who come after her. As Atwood has remarked, this is "what happens to history – something that's a very intense experience for the people who are living it becomes a subject of speculation, often of witticism, and rather detached analysis two hundred years later" (qtd. in Davidson 117). Furthermore, as Pieixoto's sly jokes and appropriation of Offred's tale reveal, post-Gileadean society still holds a resonance of the misogyny that allowed the Sons of Jacob to come to power in the first place; "disturbing signs of the staying power of sexism" emerge from his lecture (Bouson 155). Thus, Offred's pain, loss, fear, and degradation are reduced to a conference lecture in which a male historian admonishes her for failure to provide "real" information for the historians that follow her:

she could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or spy. What we would not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of print-out from [the Commander's] private computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us. (*HT* 310)

In the hands of historians such as Pieixoto, Offred's tale becomes a mere crumb, and his lecture is predominantly focused on finding out the identity of the Commander, even falling into admiration for the Sons of Jacob's ability to so thoroughly reorganize society to meet their own purposes, calling them "brilliant" and remarking on their "considerable ingenuity" (308). His remarks about Offred, on the other hand, are often dismissive and condescending; rather than work towards an authentic understanding of Offred as an individual, he considers her merely "one of many" who "must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part" (305). In Professor Pieixoto's lecture, Offred becomes what she feared she would to Gileadean history: unseen. "From the point of view of future history, this kind, [the Handmaids will] be invisible" she says when imaging a future history in which Gileadean control would present the Handmaids' lives and sacrifices as nonexistent and unimportant (228). The true terror of this lies in the fact that this happens in a post-Gileadean world in which equality is nominally restored. The true terror of this lies in the fact that it happens in a world disturbingly like our own.

## Chapter Two: *The Handmaid's Tale* as Satire

But as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal. (Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal" 1729)

This excerpt from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," (1729) one of the most well-known satires in the English literary tradition, serves as an epigraph for *The Handmaid's Tale*. Swift's essay, in which he caustically suggests that social and economic problems in eighteenth-century Ireland could be remedied by butchering and eating the children of the poor, operates as a satire against those who refuse to consider realistic and logical options that will genuinely help the poor in Ireland. The use of this excerpt as an epigraph clearly invites a reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a satire in the same vein as Swift's. His ironic proposal and Atwood's Republic of Gilead, although separated by more than two centuries, are similar in their approaches: in an effort to point out the flaws of their respective societies, both offer an extreme solution that could be put in place by those who seek only to maintain their own wealth and power at the expense of others. However, in other writings, Atwood seems to distance herself from this satiric tradition:

Utopias are often satirical, the satire being directed at whatever society the writer is currently living in – that is, the superior arrangements of the Utopians reflect badly on *us*. Dystopias are often more like dire warnings than satires, dark shadows cast by the present into the future. ("Writing Utopia" 94)

What are we to make of this apparent contradiction? A brief definition of satire will demonstrate that while *The Handmaid's Tale* is in fact a dire warning, it is for that very

reason a satire. Thus, it becomes clear that although Atwood makes a distinction between satire and dystopia, both have a deeply similar, if not an identical purpose.

In its most basic definition, “satire is the ... art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, or scorn” (Abrams 85). Satire often relies on humor – using “laughter as a weapon” – but comedy is not its primary concern (85). The weapon of laughter is aimed toward a particular subject – whether it is a specific individual, a social trend, or an entire belief system. Laughter, however, is not the distinguishing feature of satiric writing – one may be compelled to laugh at the absurdity of the subject, but one is also compelled to feel disdain for the subject’s flaws, spurring the reader to think critically about the issue at hand. Ultimately, what the satirist offers is not humor, but social commentary. She works to subtly point out the dangers and flaws of society with the intention of correcting them by bringing them to the reader’s attention, often in sly and subversive ways. Satire is often uncomfortable and troublesome for the reader, for in its efforts at reform, it must bring to the forefront issues that many would prefer remain hidden and ignored. Satire “promises to tell us what we do not want to know – what we may, in fact, resist knowing” (Connery and Combe 1). In that sense, “satirists specialize in demolition projects” by destroying our blinders and requiring us to look at the dangerous and uncomfortable elements of society that we would rather overlook (1). By turning our attention towards these elements, the satirist turns her humor and wit into astute commentaries on those aspects of her society that she feels compelled to critique.

A defining component of satire that is thoroughly employed in *The Handmaid's Tale* is exaggeration; indeed, “where other writers might use simile or metaphor, the satirist uses hyperbole” (Connery and Combe 6). Just as Jonathan Swift used the drastically exaggerated example of harvesting and butchering the children of the Irish poor in the 1720s, Atwood uses extreme exaggerations of the consequences of the rise of right-wing ideology in 1980s America. This penchant for exaggeration on the part of the satirist operates to reveal the extreme possibilities inherent in the issues at hand; by following the flawed logic of Christian fundamentalism to its most extreme conclusion, Atwood forces her reader to acknowledge the failings and danger that are intrinsic to that ideology, even if the fundamentalism at work in 1980s America seems relatively mild compared to that of the Republic of Gilead. Atwood forces us to see what that fundamentalism may become if we remain complicit in its ascendancy to power. Coupled with this, *The Handmaid's Tale* also embodies another important aspect of satiric writing, which is the tendency of the genre to “unif[y] its audience, bonding them against the enemy under attack” (Connery and Combe 9). Atwood accomplishes this through the close first- person narration, which allows the reader to actively identify with Offred and the oppression she suffers under the hands of the Gileadean government. Furthermore, Offred’s address to the reader as she ponders the nature of her storytelling – “You don’t tell a story only to yourself.... *Dear You*, I’ll say ... I will say *you, you*, like an old love song” – works to make the reader an active participant in Offred’s tale, thus uniting the audience with Offred in her subversive work against the Gileadean regime,

which is, of course, representative of the Christian fundamentalism Atwood seeks to criticize (40).

In a 1990 article, Stephanie Barbé Hammer outlines the ways in which *The Handmaid's Tale* “possesses many formal and thematic features typical of traditional satire,” including

complex rhetorical devices such as formal disguise (a satire which masquerades as a novel which in turn masquerades as an autobiography) and irony, a static or nonprogressive plot where very little actually seems to happen, the character of a commonsense, average narrator who speaks in a seemingly straightforward manner, and the scene of a dystopic nightmare city. Furthermore, *Handmaid* boasts what is perhaps the most crucial element of satiric writing, namely, the clear existence of a topical political target, which here is very obviously evangelical Christian fundamentalism. (39)

Thus, in both its form and style, *The Handmaid's Tale* is at once cautionary dystopia and satire. The satiric elements of the novel come from all directions; there are moments of sly humor and subversive puns that work to demonstrate the absurdity of the Gileadean regime, and by extension, the historical moment from which it sprung.

We see this very early on when Offred begins to describe her life as a Handmaid: “The bell that measures time is ringing. Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries. As in a nunnery too, there are few mirrors” (8). She goes on to explain the required wardrobe for the Handmaids: red, floor length, long sleeved dresses, with a white headdress, or “wings” to keep the face hidden. Red shoes and gloves complete the ensemble. As Offred descends the stairs of the Commander’s house, she catches a glimpse of herself in one of the few mirrors available to her. She describes herself as a “distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak.... A Sister dipped in blood” (9). By aligning the Handmaids with nuns, Atwood is cleverly

commenting upon the absurdity of evangelical Christianity's stance towards women. The Handmaids – indeed all women in Gilead – are expected to be pious and chaste; however, the mention of blood and the red clothing that the Handmaids must always wear (the women of other statuses must follow strict, color-coded dress codes as well) clearly symbolizes sexuality. The Handmaids and their alignment with the color red, the color of blood, “defines the Handmaids association with menstrual and birthing blood” thus reaffirming their role as primarily sexual beings (Michael 156). The red habits of the Handmaids thus make them “Sister[s] dipped in blood” – nuns with a sexual purpose. There is an inherent contradiction here between what society wants the Handmaids to be and what society needs them to be. They are to be pure, virtuous, and faithful like nuns of the time before, but their role as sexual, reproductive beings is paramount. Thus, they are nuns dressed in red, walking contradictions. This also points to the absurdity of the sexual repression of Gilead: making the Handmaids nun-like is yet another way of taking as much sex as possible out of the sexual act.

Another moment of subversive irony comes when Offred and Ofglen are shopping and are approached by Japanese tourists, “out for local color” (27). The tourists are a mixed group of men and women, equipped with the requisite “aggressive cheerfulness” and cameras of tourists of the pre-Gileadean time (28). The short skirts, the makeup, and the high heels of the women stun Offred. While this moment reminds the reader that the world beyond Gilead has remained intact, Offred's wry observation of the group evokes a fascinating satiric moment: “I used to dress like that. That was freedom. *Westernized*, they used to call it” (28). The irony here lies in the fact that

‘Western’, or for all intents and purposes, American culture, is anachronistic to Offred. The culture that the Japanese tourists embody is wholly altered, if not completely nonexistent. *Westernized*, a word that used to evoke a sense of the American values of freedom and consumerism, is now merely an archaic adjective. Western culture was once something emulated; the fact that the Japanese tourists still imitate what used to be American culture reveals the staying power of the old way of life that Offred is used to. Her ironic observation serves to undermine the Gileadean regime that supposes to have successfully obliterated the previous culture. By undermining the Sons of Jacob in this way, Atwood seems to be commenting upon the futility and ultimate failures of all fanatical groups that seek wholesale reinventions of an existing society.

Atwood also satirically comments upon the deeply flawed ideology of Gilead when Offred describes a government slogan hanging on a banner at a Women’s Prayvaganza (indeed, that word itself smacks of satiric absurdity). “Below the red writing there’s a line of smaller print, in black...*God is a National Resource*” (213). This ludicrous statement is clearly meant to mock the dangerous use of religion in politics. The leaders of Gilead, drawn from Christian New Right fundamentalists, in their fervor to assert their religious doctrine over the political and social spheres, have reduced their belief in God to a commodity that functions only to sustain the political and social goals of the nation-state. In their efforts at intense religious devotion and indoctrination, the Sons of Jacob have lost all religious authenticity.

These are only a few of many moments in the novel in which Atwood seeks to satirize the society that gave birth to Gilead. However, in order to most effectively

undertake a reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* as satire, one should undertake explorations of particular characters in the novel that function as certain “types” or embodiments of those elements of late twentieth- century society that Atwood subjects to criticism.

Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia function as satires of religious fundamentalism and New Right women; Offred’s mother serves as a satire of a certain kind of radical feminism; and Professor James Pieixoto operates as satire on academia.

*Taken at Their Word: Aunt Lydia and Serena Joy*

I’ve learned to do without a lot of things. If you have a lot of things, said Aunt Lydia, you get too attached to this material world and you forget about spiritual values. You must cultivate poverty of the spirit. Blessed are the meek. She didn’t go on to say anything about inheriting the earth. (*HT* 64)

Offred’s wry observation of Aunt Lydia’s manipulative use of Scripture is representative of the way in which Aunt Lydia functions in the novel. A prominent figure in the cadre of Aunts – women who are assigned to train and control the Handmaids – Aunt Lydia is repeatedly referenced as the voice of Gileadean ideology as Offred recalls her time at the Re-Education Center. Power-hungry and utterly convinced of her own righteousness, Aunt Lydia functions as the mouthpiece of the Sons of Jacob (her role as mouthpiece is underscored by Offred’s repeated use of the phrase “Aunt Lydia said”). Using oft-quoted and well known pieces of Scripture – “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5) – but purposely omitting those aspects that do not align with Gileadean ideology, Aunt Lydia is demonstrative of the

ways in which fundamentalist Christians often pick and choose aspects of the Bible to serve their political and social purposes.

Perhaps the most effective satiric moment concerning Aunt Lydia comes when Offred recalls her lesson on modesty. “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” (28). The superb irony of this statement lies in the fact that the sole purpose of the Handmaids *is* to be penetrated. Their ability to be productively penetrated is, in fact, what defines them; thus, Aunt Lydia’s admonishment that the Handmaids must remain impenetrable shows a significant contradiction in the ideology of Christian fundamentalism. The regime is heavily dependent on the Handmaids’ ability to be penetrated and reproduce, yet women such as Aunt Lydia consider themselves too proper and pure to openly acknowledge the fact that the Handmaids serve a primarily sexual function. Thus, she denies it completely. This is similar to the Handmaids’ alignment with nuns, and falls in line with another moment in the text in which Aunt Lydia demonstrates intense sexual repression:

The spectacles women used to make of themselves.... No wonder those things used to happen to them. *Things*, the word she used when whatever it stood for was too distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass her lips. A successful life for her was one that avoided *things*, excluded *things*. (55)

Aunt Lydia’s aversion to *things* – anything pleasant or unpleasant, anything complicated that cannot be easily reduced to a binary opposition – makes her absurd in Offred’s eyes and thus in the eyes of the reader. This absurdity operates to call attention to the flawed presumptions and contradictory nature of Christian fundamentalism, particularly in a society that is in desperate need of reproductive sexuality. Aunt Lydia’s purse-lipped

warnings against penetration and “*things*” make her ridiculous and invite the reader’s contempt, emphasizing the satiric elements of the text.

In addition to the Aunt Lydia, Atwood uses the character of Serena Joy to supplement her satire of Christian fundamentalism. Where Aunt Lydia operates to highlight the absurdities of the Republic of Gilead, Serena Joy functions to accentuate the tendency towards hypocrisy in fundamentalism. Upon meeting Serena Joy after being posted to the Commander’s house, Offred realizes where she had seen her before:

The first time was on television, when I was eight or nine. . . . Sometimes when I couldn’t find any [cartoons] I would watch the Growing Souls Gospel Hour. One of the women was called Serena Joy. She was the lead soprano. She was ash blond, petite, with 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)

The irony of Offred’s dread at recognizing who Serena Joy used to be lies in the fact that, as we soon discover, Serena Joy no longer maintains the pious religiosity for which she was once famous. When Serena Joy suggests that Offred sleep with Nick because the Commander may be sterile, she is not only committing treason, but heresy as well; in the mindset of Gilead, to suggest that a man may be infertile is blasphemous. Serena’s other sins – cigarettes, perfume – also convey her unwillingness to wholly accept Gileadean law and suggest that she is not a “true” believer. Atwood also is sure to point out the inherent hypocrisy of women publicly advocating Christian fundamentalism. Offred describes the “other things” Serena moved on to after the Growing Souls Gospel Hour:

Her real name was Pam. I read that in a profile of her, in a news magazine, long after I first watched her singing while my mother slept in on Sunday mornings.

By that time she was worthy of a profile: *Time* or *Newsweek* it was, it must have been. She wasn't singing any more 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)

And moments later, after reflecting on the assassination attempts that plagued Serena Joy as a public figure and her descent into domesticity with the advent of the Republic: "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). Offred's contempt and scorn for Serena Joy and her complicity in the ascendancy of the Gileadean regime function as a scathing satire on New Right women. By pointing out how Serena Joy is "speechless" and "furious" at being "taken at her word," Atwood is offering an astute commentary on the consequences for women in the New Right's crusade against feminism. By participating in the attack on secularism and the women's rights movement, women such as Serena Joy may have gained a modicum of power, but it is at the price of their own freedom and dignity. New Right women who so fervently worked against feminism while simultaneously taking advantage of its gains will find themselves in a difficult position if the values and policies they promote are actually enacted, as "Serena Joy's anguish lies in her inability to adapt to the wifely role she has so ardently advocated" (Freibert 283). She has realized the full consequences of her own hypocrisy and is infuriated at being taken at her word. Serena Joy and her obvious unhappiness function in the novel as a reminder that New Right ideology uses women merely as pawns for its misogynistic goals. Once these goals have been met, all

women, even those who helped advance the cause, are reduced to severely circumscribed domestic functions and stripped of their rights and identities.

*A Women's Culture: Offred's Mother*

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* can indeed be called a feminist work and much of Atwood's commentary focuses on anti-feminist strains in late twentieth-century America, feminism itself does not go un-satirized in the novel. Atwood criticizes radical Christianity, but she also criticizes radical feminism that unintentionally strengthens opposition to feminism as a whole and inadvertently supports various right wing ideologies. This is accomplished through Offred's mother, a peripheral character in the novel. Offred spends little time discussing her, making those moments when she does all the more important for what they reveal about Atwood's indictment of a certain kind of radical feminism.

Offred's mother (we never learn her name) is a figure of 1960s Second-Wave feminism; she is an intense activist who chose to have her child alone at the age of thirty-seven, and Offred grew up in the midst of her rallies, marches, and feminist networking. She is absurd in many ways in Offred's memories of her: "I didn't see why she had to dress that way, in overalls, as if she were young; or to swear so much" (180). She was rowdy, often coming home to her teenaged daughter bloody and bruised from rioting; in many ways she is a caricature of a radical feminist, always putting her ideology before her daughter, expecting Offred to "be the incarnation of her ideas" and "vindicate her life for her" (122). She openly mocks men, saying that they are no good except for "ten

seconds' worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women" (121). In this novel which serves to warn against fundamentalism of all kinds, her extremism makes her suspect. Atwood seeks to criticize this extremism by aligning it with the New Right. New Right conservatism and feminism seem like strange bedfellows, yet when it comes to certain aspects of their agendas, the two philosophies intersect in unsettling ways. While remembering her life before Gilead, Offred reveals a memory of her mother:

In a park somewhere, with my mother.... [T]here were some women burning books, that's what she was really there for.... There were some men too, among the women, and the books were magazines.... The woman handed me one of the magazines. It had a pretty woman on it, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hands.... I threw the magazine into the flames. It ruffled opening the in the wind of its burning; big flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash in the air, before my eyes. (38 – 39)

The anti-pornography campaigns mounted by some feminists that culminated in burnings amounts to censorship – the kind of censorship that gets out of control in the hands of fundamentalists. What Atwood is acknowledging here is that even though radical feminists have the freedom of women as their goal, their complicity in censorship and the destruction of pornography “inadvertently give credence to right wing calls for sexual control and book burnings” (Freibert 284). This connection between the two ideologies is strengthened later in the novel when the Commander offers Offred an illicit copy of *Vogue*. She asks him how he has managed to hold on to such blasphemous material: “these were supposed to have been burned, I said. There were house-to-house searches, bonfires...” (*HT* 157). Echoing her memory of the feminist bonfire, this mention of the Gileadean bonfire “subtly implicates Offred's mother and her friends in the deeds of the

Gileadean society. The difference between the two acts of censorship, it is implied, is simply one of degree” (Tolan 23). Furthermore, the symbolism contained in Offred’s memory of the anti-pornography bonfire, of “parts of women’s bodies, turning to black ash in the air,” should not go unnoticed here. By burning images of women’s bodies that they disapprove of, the activists are unintentionally destroying women’s actual bodies by helping to pave the way for the censorship and sexual control advocated by the Gileadean regime.

This is underscored by the Aunts’ showings of violent pornography at the Re-Education Center to reinforce the Gileadean belief that women were not respected or protected in the time before. “Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That is what they thought of women, then. Her voice trembled with indignation” (*HT* 118). Although it is uncomfortable to admit, one can imagine Offred’s mother and her feminist friends also trembling with indignation. Aunt Lydia goes on to embrace the feminists of the earlier era, further underscoring the dangerous line between radical feminism and social control: “Mind you, some of their ideas were sound enough.... We would have to condone some of their ideas, even today” (119). The fact that Aunt Lydia – someone who embodies everything that is wrong with Gileadean society – condones the ideas of radical feminists like Offred’s mother is very alarming. Atwood is clearly bringing the two characters and everything they stand for together in order to critically examine their extremism and suggest that they are two sides of the same coin. This is reiterated when Aunt Lydia continues: “But they were Godless, and

that can make all the difference” (119). Thus, Atwood is implying that fanaticism, regardless of its goals, is thoroughly dangerous.

Offred’s memories of the movies shown at the Red Center leads to another recollection of her mother; in fact, she sees her mother in one of the “Unwoman” documentaries Aunt Lydia shows (118). In addition to forcing the Handmaids to watch violent pornography, the Aunts would sometime show documentaries from the past to illustrate the evils of “Unwomen,” women who have proven themselves to be useless to the Republic. Offred sees her mother, young, earnest, and pretty, participating in a Take Back the Night march. The women at the Center are shocked that the writing from the banners in the film has not been blacked out, that they have been permitted to read something. Offred wonders, “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 a remarkably disconcerting way, Atwood reminds us that both groups – radical feminists and New Right fundamentalists – argued for more respect for women. How each group defines that respect is drastically different; nonetheless, we see how easily feminist rhetoric can be co-opted and manipulated by those with anti-feminist agendas. This is emphasized again when Offred, after attending the ceremonial labor and birth by another Handmaid, reflects on the ways in which childbirth has been completely removed from the male-dominated medical establishment of the earlier time and is a thoroughly female event: “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). Again we see that the goals and rhetoric of radical feminism can be easily misinterpreted

and exploited by other forms of radicalism with drastically different objectives. Acknowledging the ways in which certain feminist agendas align with the misogynist agendas of certain evangelical movements can be a challenge for many readers, particularly feminists. By satirizing Offred's mother, Atwood is participating in one of the most important aspects of satire, as discussed above: she is telling "us what we do not want to know – what we may, in fact, resist knowing" (Connery and Combe 1).

*Within his time period: Professor Pieixoto*

The final target of Atwood's satire that will be discussed here is the "Historical Notes" coda, in which Professor James Darcy Pieixoto gives his lecture on *The Handmaid's Tale* at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies in the year 2195. With this section, Atwood works to criticize and comment upon late twentieth-century academia by imaging its revival in the twenty-second century following the downfall of the Republic of Gilead. Atwood quickly establishes and then subverts the reader's expectation that this second future she is presenting will be dramatically different from the Republic of Gilead. The Sons of Jacob, of course, created a society that was strictly segregated by sex and that sought to eliminate all non-whites and non-Protestants. The world we see in the "Historical Notes" is at first glance, quite different. The conference presents both sexes working together in their scholarly efforts, and the setting – Denay, Nunavit, a predominately aboriginal Canadian territory – together with the aboriginal names of the scholars (Maryann Crescent Moon, Johnny Running Dog, etc.) suggests that this society is quite different from the one we just left. However, as we soon discover,

despite the apparent equality of the sexes and the vastly different ethnic composition, the flaws of pre-Gileadean culture that allowed the Sons of Jacob to come to power in the first place still remain.

The preposterous nature of the conference is immediately established prior to Professor Pieixoto's lecture when the Chair of the symposium, Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, gives a few announcements:

The fishing expedition will go forward tomorrow as planned, and for those of you who have not brought suitable rain gear and insect repellent, these are available for a nominal charge at the Registration Desk. The nature walk and Outdoor Period-Costume Sing-Song have been rescheduled for the day after tomorrow, as we are assured by our own infallible Professor Johnny Running Dog of a break in the weather at that time. (299)

It is hard to believe that only mere moments ago we were in Gilead, terrified of the fate that awaited Offred as she was being carted away in the black van of the Eyes. Suddenly we are dropped into a world in which lack of insect repellent and bad weather seem to be the only things our characters have to worry about; the "Outdoor Period-Costume Sing-Song" stands in stark contrast to the Offred's tale of degradation and death that we have just witnessed. By juxtaposing the inconsequential nature of their initial conversation and the "remote intellectualism" that follows "with the immediacy of Offred's 'I', Atwood undermines" the twenty-second-century scholars, "demonstrating how [they] disregard her suffering" (Tolan 30).

Professor Pieixoto, similar to the ways in which Offred's mother functions as a caricature of a radical feminist, seems to embody everything wrong with academia. He is condescending and pretentious, showing off his intelligence with pedantic jokes. The title of his talk – "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*" –

suggests an immediate undermining of Offred's authority as a chronicler of life in the Republic of Gilead. He continues with this superciliousness as he discusses why Offred's tape recordings were named "The Handmaid's Tale": "partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer ... [and] all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*" (HT 301). He is not only calling attention to the old-fashioned slang term for women as sexual objects, but also openly participating in the continued use of that sexist language; this amounts to the reduction of Offred to sexual object once again. The fact that his comment is greeted with laughter and applause serves to underscore the overly cerebral tone of this conference of academics. Pieixoto again challenges Offred's intelligence when discussing what is known about her pre-Gilead life: "She appears to have been an educated woman, insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated" (305). Again and again, Pieixoto reveals his sexism and haughtiness as he continually dismisses Offred as a valid authority on the subject of the Gileadean regime. Like many a historian (though certainly not all), Pieixoto is concerned with the "big names" and events of the past, not the everyday lives of those who were controlled by those big names and events. Thus, his discussion ignores the pain and power of Offred's tale and instead focuses on the possible identity of the Commander. Just as Offred served a merely biological function in Gilead, in the post-Gilead period, she serves a merely informative function. For Professor Pieixoto and his fellow scholars, "she is a stepstone for professional advancement, and a possible source of information about his real interest, the male elite of Gilead" (Stein 274). Professor Pieixoto's devaluation of Offred as an

individual serves as strong satiric commentary on the inability of some academics to fully appreciate the real experiences of those they claim to study.

Professor Pieixoto's academic flaws culminate in an "editorial aside" he offers during his speech, an aside that sounds very much like the admonishments espoused by many a late twentieth-century historian:

If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific. Also Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (*Applause.*) (HT 302)

This is cultural relativism taken to a dangerous extreme. Pieixoto, rather than acting as a historian who seeks to understand Gileadean life, has become an apologist for the atrocities committed by the Republic. While one must always be wary of being anachronistic, to completely absolve the Gileadeans of any guilt or moral condemnation is incongruous with Offred's tale. If we are not to pass moral judgment on them, then Offred's suffering and her revolutionary act of telling her tale becomes utterly meaningless, for if we do not adjudicate their actions, then we leave the door open for oppression of this severity to reoccur. Offred has presented a tale in which her husband is killed, her daughter taken from her, and she herself is pushed into sexual slavery; incompliant men and women are forced into atrocious labor camps; those who resist the totalitarian regime are tortured and killed. For Pieixoto to suggest that historians should not pass judgment on these actions is absolutely ludicrous. It is the historian's job to understand, but if that understanding precludes any moral obligation to acknowledge the evils of such a society, then he or she has utterly failed both those they seek to understand

and those of their own era whom they seek to educate. Pieixoto's cerebral understanding of Gilead, presented as a coda to Offred's deeply emotional and evocative tale, functions to criticize the all too often glib façades of academic historians. By satirizing academia, Atwood is pointing to yet another force in contemporary society that allows extremism to flourish.

Christian fundamentalism, radical feminism, and overly cerebral academia:

Atwood takes all of these strains of late-twentieth century American culture to task. The emphasis on the similarities of these apparently disparate elements works to establish the satiric force of the novel. In particular, in her alignment of Christian fundamentalism and radical feminism, Atwood demonstrates the ways in which these supposedly oppositional forces are in fact quite similar in their tendencies to restrict personal freedom. By satirizing those elements of American society that she saw as problematic – by “diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, or scorn” – Atwood is fulfilling the ultimate goal of satire, which is to bring to light the deeply flawed aspects of society (Abrams 85). Just as most satire “tends toward open-endedness [and] irresolution,” so does *The Handmaid's Tale* (Connery and Combe 5). Not only do we not know Offred's fate, the novel offers no easy solutions to the problems it holds up to the light of criticism. “This irresolution reflects the position of mid-1980s feminism” which was responding to the backlash, as well as the position of the fundamentalist movement, which was also still negotiating its place in the American social milieu (Tolan 31). By intervening with satiric force,

Atwood brilliantly invites examinations of these trends and offers a warning against their potential for extremism.

### Chapter Three: *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Postmodern Text

Notoriously difficult to define, the term “postmodern” has become a synecdoche for any element of contemporary culture that works to subvert traditional expectations. While this aspect is certainly important to an understanding of what we mean when we say “postmodern,” it falls short of providing an adequate explanation of this highly complex and richly varied critical term. Thus, before an exploration that seeks to utilize a postmodern framework can be undertaken, one must clearly establish the definition(s) to which he or she subscribes. For the purposes of this examination of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I will take Linda Hutcheon's conceptualization articulated in her 1988 book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. Hutcheon writes that “postmodern culture...has a contradictory relationship to what we usually label our dominant, liberal humanist culture. It does not deny it, as some have asserted. Instead, it contests it from within its own assumptions” (6). Those assumptions that postmodern art seeks to contest and subvert include notions of “value, order, meaning, control, and identity that have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism” (13). Hutcheon goes on to assert that

Those humanistic principles are still operative in our culture, but for many they are no longer seen as eternal and unchallengeable. The contradictions of both postmodern theory and practice are positioned within the system and yet work to allow its premises to be seen as fictions or as ideological structures. This does not necessarily destroy their “truth” value, but it does define the conditions of that “truth.” (13)

Postmodernism thus seeks to overturn and question what is typically taken for granted in Western culture; traditional notions of what determines subjectivity, identity, and truth are all subverted by postmodern thought. In alignment with deconstruction,

postmodernism challenges binary oppositions that often obscure the truly complex nature of things. Rather than taking concepts such as identity and truth at face value, postmodern fiction operates in a variety of ways to call the apparently static nature of them into question.

Postmodernism dismisses essentialism and asserts that all experience is predicated on social context, and postmodern literature “recognizes that all perception, cognition, action, and articulation are shaped, if not determined, by the social domain” (Russell qtd. in Hutcheon, *Poetics* 51). Or, as Offred remarks when considering the Commander’s request to play Scrabble with her as “the most bizarre thing that’s happened” to her, “context is all” (*HT* 144). As an aesthetic form, postmodern literature is commonly identified as embodying “contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, and excess” (Lodge 228 – 239). In her discussion of postmodernism, Magali Cornier Michael writes that postmodern fiction employs “aesthetic strategies that radically subvert Western metaphysics...these strategies include disruptions of traditional notions of subjectivity, character development, representation, language, interpretation, narrative, history, and binary logic in general” (7). In both form and content, postmodern literature operates to undermine traditional expectations. Postmodern writers, working both within and against traditional conventions of literature “ask us to rethink those conventions...*as conventions*, but also as ideological strategies. Such novels destabilize things we used to think we could take for granted when we read novels: narrative unity, reliable point of view, coherent character representation” (Hutcheon *Canadian Postmodern* 21, emphasis in original). My exploration of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a postmodern text will focus on

the ways in which Atwood subverts, undermines, and calls into question traditional conventions of truth, narrative authority, and identity.

*“I made that up”: Truth and Narrative Authority*

A distinguishing feature of postmodern literature is the undermining of traditional notions of truth and the narrator as a reliable purveyor of said truth. Traditional literary texts offer dependable narrators that speak with the utmost authority; they offer no reason to question their authenticity, motivations, or reliability. When reading a postmodern text, one is often compelled to question the narrator’s dependability and his or her accuracy in relaying the ‘truth’ they purport to tell. This questioning is highly emphasized in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as Offred repeatedly undermines her narrative authority by admitting that she may be wrong about something and by admitting that she completely made something up. Early in the novel when Offred is alone and thinking of former times, she remembers common sayings of men in the time before: “Men used to say, I’d like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I’d like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don’t really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it” (37). This brief moment not only works to destabilize Offred’s authority as a reliable narrator by undercutting her ability to definitively state what men used to say, but it also undermines the reliability of language as a whole to convey truth. The pun “I only had their words for it” draws attention to the fact that the phrase “to only have someone’s word” – a phrase which conveys hesitancy to believe what someone says is true – also evokes questions about words themselves. If someone’s word for something is of

questionable veracity, then aren't words as a whole of questionable veracity? Thus, is it ever possible to fully understand the "truth" of anything using only language?

Postmodern literature suggests that it is not. As Offred remarks, "All of it is a reconstruction.... It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact ... there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances, too many gestures, which could mean this or that" (134). The stories we tell then and truths we purport to expound are limited to the unstable nature of language, and thus there cannot be one truth; there can only be reconstructions. This "recognition that versions of events are necessarily mediated, and that fiction will contaminate any version of reality, demonstrates a postmodern impulse" (Michael 159).

Offred's postmodern subversion of truth as a unified whole shows itself again when she imagines Luke's fate.

Here is what I believe. I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket, a tangle of bracken.... What is left of him: his hair, the bones, the plaid wool shirt, green and black, the leather belt, the work boots.... I believe this. I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, gray cement, on a ledge or the edge of something, a bed or chair.... 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.... He made contact with the others, there must be a resistance, a government in exile.... 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. This is also a belief of mine. This also may be untrue. (*HT* 104 – 106)

Offred's many truths about what happened to Luke after their failed attempt to escape is wrought with contradictions – he was immediately killed, he was captured and imprisoned, he made it safely across the border. All of these are true to Offred.

Furthermore, her belief that that she will be ready for any news of Luke's fate may also

be a false belief. She is not only completely uncertain about which truth to believe concerning her husband, but she is also uncertain about her own readiness to know any truth at all. This passage is highly representative of postmodern subversion of traditional notions of truth; by creating a narrator who does not have access to any kind of verifiable truth because it has been denied by those in power, Atwood must imbue Offred with fractured, unknowing, paradoxical truths. The undermining of truth extends to Offred's own beliefs about her own emotions. What Atwood is accomplishing here, then, is a destabilization of truth as a reliable avenue to understanding and knowledge – understanding and knowledge not only of events, but of oneself as well. When access to information is always problematic due to the limits of language and the manipulation of knowledge by those in power, the viability of our concept of truth is severely weakened.

Narrative authority is again undermined when Offred describes her first liaison with Nick. After a brief description of going to his room and making love, she says, “I made that up. Here is what happened,” and begins another version of the story (261). And following that version: “It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction” (263). Again, Offred undermines her reliability as a narrator by openly admitting that things did not actually occur the way she describes them; “even while telling her tale, she deconstructs it,” never allowing the reader to fully accept her initial versions (Stein 274). Offred can offer no “definitive” account of what “really” happened; she can only approximate and revise, with no hope of ever fully conveying the “truth” of the encounter. Furthermore, that fact that all of Offred's information about the world beyond her narrowly circumscribed

existence depends on what the government allows her to see and what the Commander chooses to tell her during their secret visits in his study, serves to emphasize that knowledge and access to any truth is inextricably linked to power relations (Michael 157).

It is important to keep in mind that Offred does not lose all authority as a narrator as she continually revises her tale. Indeed, the mere fact that she is telling this tale is a subversive act that gives her power and the emotional strength of her tale serves to give her credibility. However, it is crucial here to make a distinction between plot and narrative, or, in other words, a distinction between the events of the tale and how those events are related to the reader. Thus, Offred has narrative authority on the level of plot; in the events of the novel, her storytelling gives her power. Her ability to tell her own story and revise it in any way she chooses, underscored by the fact that the reader is wholly dependent upon her for the tale, emphasizes her authority in the plot. On the level of narration however, Offred's reliability is continually called into question; her tendency to revise and openly admit her shortcomings as a dependable provider of truth subverts her authority. In other words, her relationship to the Gileadean regime is one marked by subversive power and therefore narrative authority; her relationship to the reader, however, is far less stable and reliable. The novel's postmodernism functions on both the levels of plot and narration because the reader does not have full access to the plot (the events of the story) because of the narration (the way in which the events are related). The inability of the narration to offer the "truth" of the plot suggests that even if there is a

“truth” to be known, it will always be mediated through narration and dependent upon certain contexts.

Coupled with this narrative instability is a strong strain of self-reflexivity and meta-narration. Rarely does postmodern literature allow the reader to “get lost” in a story; in other words, postmodern literature often works to remind readers that they are reading a fiction, a construction. As Linda Hutcheon writes, “postmodern texts tend to make very self-conscious their writing, their reading, and various contexts in which both acts take place” (*Canadian Postmodern* 17). Atwood utilizes this method often; Offred continually draws attention to the fact that she is telling a story about her time in Gilead.

It’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along. Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. 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. Even when there is no one. (*HT* 39 – 40)

Here, Offred “acknowledges both the process of fictionalizing (or ‘narrativizing’)” and sees the difficulty of telling the story of history, of recasting brute experience into narrative form” (Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* 17). And later, when remembering her failed escape with Luke and her daughter: “I don’t want to be telling this story” (225); and again, after her first night with Nick: “I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light... I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one’s life” (267). Offred’s self-reflexive moments that reveal her hesitancy and frustration serve to remind the reader that this is a constructed tale.

The “Historical Notes” coda at the end of the novel also serves to emphasize the constructed nature of the story; Offred’s tale goes from being lived experience occasionally interrupted by meta-narration to a document, a story first constructed by her and then by the historians that come after her. The layers of construction here function to continually reassert the postmodern subversion of traditional expectations concerning narrative. In stylistic sense, “The Historical Notes” section also contributes to a reading of the novel as postmodern as it functions as yet another open ending. Always reluctant to include conclusive and closed endings that seek to answer all the questions posed by the novel, postmodern literature often employs “multiple endings” as a way of questioning and resisting the Western desire for easy and often overly simplistic closure (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 59). Offred’s step in the van of the Eyes is one such ending, and Professor Pieixoto’s talk is another. Both endings are incomplete and lack closure on the levels of plot and narrative. The conference in 2195 at first seems to provide the closure that the other ending is lacking; it tells us that the Gileadean regime was relatively short lived and that Offred escaped to tell her tale. However, as we have seen in the previous two chapters, upon closer inspection, this coda ultimately works to remind the reader that not only are the details of Offred’s fate forever lost, but that the deep-seated sexism that contributed to the rise of the Sons of Jacob in late twentieth-century America remains in late twenty-second century Canada. As Karen F. Stein asserts in her article “Scheherazade in Dystopia”, “the novel remains deliberately ambiguous: it first constructs, then reverses an optimistic conclusion to the tale” (274).

In addition to the incomplete narrative frame and lack of closure, we have seen that our narrator repeatedly undermines her own authority by acknowledging her inability to know any truth and calls attention to the fact that her tale is an explicit reconstruction rather than an “authentic” journey into her mind and experience. Where does this leave us as readers? It leaves us questioning the traditional conceptions of truth and accuracy that we have come to expect from our fictional narrators, as well as the closure we have come to expect from our authors. Offred’s attempts to tell her story about her life as a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead suggest that “no representation can escape fictionalization” (Michael 137).

*The Many Versions of Offred: A Postmodern Identity*

We can clearly see another postmodern sentiment in the ways in which Offred’s identity continually shifts as she tells her story. Rather than remaining static and unchanging, Offred’s identity – how she perceives herself – is fluid and sometimes even contradictory. Working against traditional conceptions of an individual’s identity as eternal and unchanging, postmodern thought suggests that identity cannot be separated from social context; one’s identity must always be considered as “situat[ed]...within culture and as a construction of culture” (Michael 33). One of the most prevalent notions of postmodernism asserts that human beings do not possess fixed identities and that people “must define themselves through mutually related processes” that are thoroughly dependent on situational contexts (Tong 176). In other words, identity is thoroughly dependent upon how we interact with those around us, and because of that, our identities

are constantly in flux. We first catch a glimpse of the fractured nature of Offred's identity with her first description of a shopping trip with Ofglen. As they approach a checkpoint and show their passes to two young Guardians, Offred conceives of herself as a valuable commodity to the Gileadean cause: "The two young Guardians salute us, raising three fingers to the rims of their berets. Such tokens are accorded to us. They are supposed to show respect, because of the nature of our service" (*HT* 21). Offred momentarily acknowledges and accepts the identity placed upon her by the regime, but then quickly dismisses it while imagining her sexual power over these young men after one of the guards violates the rules of conduct by looking at her face.

It's an event, a small defiance of rule, so small as to be undetected, but such moments are the rewards I hold out for myself, like the candy I hoarded, as a child.... As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it.... Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. (21 – 22)

In a matter of moments, Offred adopts three identities: the Handmaid serving the Republic, child hoarding candy, and passive but powerful sexual object. Her equivocation – "I'm ashamed of myself.... I'm not ashamed after all" – reveals the shifting nature of not only her emotions, but of her subjectivity as well. Offred's shift from being ashamed to feeling power in her ability to sexually agitate the guards is demonstrative of her shifting identity. In one moment, she adopts the role of modest Handmaid; in the next she adopts the role of sex object. This shift works to reveal postmodernism's exploration of the subject as "a socially and culturally constructed position" in the various ways in which Offred imagines herself in relation to those around

her (Michael 33). Far from being static and unchanging, Offred's conception of self is intricately bound up with those around her and her interactions with them. This is underscored moments later as the next chapter begins after she and Ofglen have passed the checkpoint: "Doubled, I walk the street" (*HT* 23). Now that her interaction with the guards is over, Offred's identity oscillates again, and she returns to being a mere Handmaid, a carbon copy of the woman walking next to her. This brief moment early in the novel is indicative of a larger theme that can be traced throughout the text. Offred's changing identities can be most clearly seen in her interactions with the men to whom she is sexually attached: her husband Luke, the Commander, and Nick.

Throughout her tale of her life in Gilead, Offred remembers her life in the time before when she was a wife and mother. The first mention of Luke comes not long after the interaction with the young Guardians, when she and Ofglen are walking through town. "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" (23). And later, a memory sparked by the lack of plastic bags at All Flesh reveals Offred's role as a mother in her previous life:

I remember those endless white plastic shopping bags, from the supermarket; I hated to waste them and would stuff them in under the sink, until the day would come when there would be too many and I would open the cupboard door and they would bulge out, sliding over the floor. Luke used to complain about it. Periodically he would take all the bags and throw them out

She 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. I'll keep them in a higher cupboard, I'd say. Don't keep them at all, he'd say. We never use them for anything. Garbage bags, I'd say. He'd say ...

Not here and now. Not where people are looking. (27)

This curiously roundabout way to introduce Offred's previous life as a mother and wife serves to demonstrate both her identity as such and her reluctance to embody that identity. This memory of something as banal as saving plastic shopping bags functions to underscore the commonplace, normal pace of Offred's life as a wife and mother prior to the Gileadean revolution. The fact that she has a daughter – a daughter who is conspicuously absent from Offred's life as a Handmaid – who is revealed in this offhand manner speaks to Offred's desire to separate herself from this previous identity. This is emphasized by the way in which she forcefully pulls herself away from this memory of Luke and their daughter: "Not here and now. Not where people are looking." This jump through time is also a jump through identities; she pulls herself away from the memory of her life as a wife and mother and reassumes the identity of a Handmaid in Gilead. The pain that Offred feels when she remembers the happiness of her previous life urges her to dismiss that identity. Her reluctance to remember and accept her previous identity reveals itself again when she is in the kitchen of the Commander's house with Rita, who is baking bread: "the kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers.... It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother. It is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out" (47). Again we catch a glimpse of Offred's identity in the time before and her insistence on preventing that identity from overtaking her in the presence of others. The use of the word "treacherous" here is also interesting; the smell that evokes memories of her former identity is not merely nostalgic, but something capable of betrayal. The betrayal here, of course, is the memory's ability to remind her of who she used to be, and to let that

previous identity overtake her in the presence of others could be extremely hazardous in her situation. Thus, who she used to be is dangerous to who she is now. What this demonstrates is the very postmodern concept that identities are changeable and fluid, and that we can, to some extent, control which identity – how we think of ourselves and how we present versions of ourselves to others – we wish to inhabit based on the situation in which we find ourselves. Her identity as a wife and mother is one that Offred only fully embraces when she is alone, when she can momentarily suspend her life as a Handmaid and adopt her former self, even if it is only in dreams and memories.

With regard to Luke, Offred's identity is primarily one of wife and mother. Once the revolution has taken hold and she is separated from him and their daughter, she assumes the identity of Handmaid; however, this role quickly becomes more complicated as Offred develops a forbidden relationship with the Commander. He arranges, through Nick, to have her meet him in his study at night, after the rest of the household has gone to bed. While descending the stairs to meet him for her first clandestine visit, Offred reflects on her identity as a Handmaid:

It's forbidden for us to be alone with the Commanders. We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favors are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no toeholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. (136)

It is important to note that Offred first defines herself and the other Handmaids in terms of what they are not – they are not courtesans, they are not entertainment for the Commanders, they are not worthy of love or romance, and they are not to have any

agency for manipulation. They are, instead, purely utilitarian – vessels to be filled and discarded once they have served their purpose.

Offred's identity in relation to the Commander shifts upon discovering that he has arranged this secret visit so she can play Scrabble with him. Offred remarks: "this was once a game of old women, old men.... Now of course it's something different. Now it's forbidden.... Now it's something he can't do with his Wife.... It's as if he's offered me drugs" (139). Offred has gone from empty vessel to companion, friend, and partner in crime. She acknowledges this shift after returning to her room, where she takes stock of her identity:

I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes. I have trouble remembering what I used to look like. I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance. But something has changed, now, tonight. Circumstances have altered. I can ask for something. (143 – 144)

This is clearly a postmodern impulse; Offred's conception of herself has changed in response to her interaction with someone else. The stakes have altered considerably; she is no longer a walking womb. Offred now sees herself as someone with a modicum of power and agency. Her identity has fundamentally shifted. The mention that she is filling a void left by the Commander's Wife also hints at the next facet of her identity that she will take on with the Commander.

Upon leaving her first secret meeting with him, the Commander asks Offred to kiss him, something also forbidden. Thus, their friendship takes on a romantic element, and Offred's identity switches to that of mistress. "The fact is I'm his mistress. Men at the top have always had mistresses, why should things be any different now?" (163).

This aspect of their relationship heightens – he teases her, allows her to read, brings her

hand lotion for her dry skin – until it ultimately culminates in a visit to Jezebel’s, an underground brothel. He dresses her up in a ridiculous outfit of feathers and sequins and takes her there disguised as a prostitute. Whereas Offred was comfortable in her identity as mistress when it was safe – playing Scrabble and reading old copies of *Vogue* – she is wholly uncomfortable with being his sexual fantasy. “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). Thus, she retreats from her identity as the Commander’s mistress once she is expected to follow that identity to its expected conclusion. This undulation between identities is indicative of a most postmodern questioning of the notion of identity as something coherent and stable; Offred’s varied identities in relation to her changing interactions with the Commander operate to demonstrate that how one conceives of oneself and how one is conceived by others are wholly dependent on context.

Offred’s identity is yet again reconstructed as she begins her forbidden relationship with Nick, the very night that the Commander takes her to Jezebel’s. While her first night with Nick is arranged by Serena Joy, Offred continues the relationship without her knowledge. Thus, Offred finally is able to make choices of her own accord. The most significant moment in her time with Nick deals expressly with her identity: “I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known” (270). Offred’s real name – her name that has been eradicated by the regime – symbolizes her previous identity. As she asserts earlier in novel, prior to her first rendezvous with Nick:

My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden. 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. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. (84)

By revealing her former name to Nick (the name that the reader never learns), Offred feels that she has finally found a stable identity. She feels that she is “known,” that she is finally more than merely a reproductive vessel or a passive sexual object. Far from contradicting the other ways in which Atwood is suggesting that identity is anything but stable, this moment serves to reiterate that suggestion. Offred does not feel that she is known – that she has a stable identity in Gilead – until she reveals her name to someone else. Her conception of being known, of having an identity beyond that of Handmaid, is wholly dependent on an interaction with another person. Furthermore, Offred’s comment that “your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others” is indicative of the novel’s emphasis on the links between identity formation and interactions with others and society as a whole. Offred’s attempts to dismiss this thought – “but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter” – demonstrates her reluctance to accept this postmodern assertion of the arbitrary nature of names and destabilization of identity. She seems to finally accept this at the tale’s end as Nick escorts the Eyes to take her away. In his attempt to calm her, to tell her that the Eyes are Mayday, he calls her by her real name. “Why should this mean anything,” she thinks (293). Telling Nick her real name was representative of Offred’s feeling that she had finally established a stable identity that she could embrace in Gilead. When Nick uses that name in an attempt to calm her, she immediately does not trust him, and thus, the signifier of that identity – her name – dissolves. Her relationship and the identity she created with Nick are in jeopardy, as is

her very life. When it comes down to situations of life and death in, her identity as defined by her relationship with another is meaningless. Again, as she interacts with those around her and her circumstances change, her identity is altered, undermined, and fractured.

Offred also revises her identity in relation to her body. Her body is a national resource, and the Sons of Jacob, working through the Aunts, have actively worked to reduce the Handmaids to their mere biological function as reproductive vessels. Offred's detailed descriptions of how she thinks about her body reveal how "her shifts of perspective under the influence of cultural doctrines...have effected a change in her imaginative conceptualization of herself" (Howells 138). Take, for example, this moment in which Offred contemplates her body:

Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own. I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons of some sort or another, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object...  
(*HT* 73 – 74)

Here we can see a clear distinction between Offred's identity in the time before and in Gilead. Before, her body was active, and thus Offred considered it a means by which she achieved her own personal goals and desires: "an implement for the accomplishment of *my* will." After the Revolution and her subsequent indoctrination as a Handmaid, in which the procreative abilities of her body are highly valued and controlled by those in power, Offred's body is no longer her own, and her identity is altered. The expectations placed upon her by the regime have become her own, and she has lost that sense of

herself that she once had. Whereas before she thought of her body as “lithe, single, solid,” she now thinks of it as “a cloud, congealed around a central object,” which is of course, her empty womb. The contrast between the adjectives she uses here are crucial: a “solid” body versus a body that is a “cloud.” Her body, much like her identity, has become insubstantial. In the time before, the control she had over her body enabled her to be active and consider herself an individual – she used to think of her body as “single”; now, her body is now passive, a vessel to be filled just like all the other bodies of all the other Handmaids. Later in the novel, when remembering the Aunts’ lectures about the chemicals that cause birth defects, Offred thinks: “I can’t think of myself, my body, without seeing the skeleton.... A cradle of life, made of bones; and within, hazards, warped proteins, bad crystals jagged as glass” (112). Offred cannot think of herself without thinking of her damaged body. Again, how she conceives of herself is intimately connected with her body; because her conception of her body has been so radically altered by the regime, so too has her identity. Atwood’s exploration of identity’s relation to the body, and in particular, how power structures work to control bodies, especially the bodies of women, reveals that “to lose control of one’s body ... means losing control over identity” (Wagner-Lawlor 88).

The Gileadean regime seeks to place a new, simplistic identity as a reproductive vessel upon the Handmaids; thus, any semblance of a coherent identity that Offred may have had is obliterated by Gilead, and her identity is one that is in a constant state of flux. Because the identity the Sons of Jacob seek to impose upon Offred and the Handmaids is so severely limiting and contradictory, and because Offred cannot allow herself to

embrace her previous identity, her conceptions of self are constantly forming and reforming in terms of her situational context. One may argue that it is the extreme nature of the circumstances Offred is in that causes the fracture and destabilization of her concept of who she is. However, it is important to keep in mind that Atwood's postmodern subversion of the notion of identity is closely aligned with the extreme nature of the novel itself. As we have seen in earlier chapters, Atwood is utilizing a futuristic dystopic setting in order to extend social realities to logical possible conclusions, bringing to light elements that already exist in contemporary culture. Therefore, the fracturing of Offred's identity and the concomitant destabilization of the notion of identity as something that is stable and coherent invites us to examine the way our own identities change in response to our circumstances. This invitation falls clearly in line with postmodern attempts to question assumptions about what it means to have an identity, and what we mean when we invoke this troubling concept. Offred "yearns for, but cannot grasp, a stable identity. [Her] narrative demonstrates not only that centered fixed identity is a fiction, but also that subjectivity is inextricably linked to relations of power" (Michael 137). And of course, in true postmodern style, there is no resolution to Offred's fractured identity. Indeed, even in "The Historical Notes" section in which future historians purport to give us answers, they are unable to determine Offred's identity, suggesting that even in times of relative stability, identity is anything but stable.

Offred's constant attempts and ultimate failures to find a stable identity and accurately tell her story, as well as the subsequent construction and manipulation of her story by the post-Gileadean historians, work to "challenge Western transcendent notions

of reality, truth, and history” (Michael 137). “By disrupting conventional notions of history, reality, truth, Atwood’s novel points the way to the creation of multiple histories, realities, truths” (Michael 170). As Offred’s seemingly contradictory versions of history layer upon one another and are ultimately exploited by post-Gileadean academia, the novel ultimately functions as a subversive narrative that heightens ambiguity, simultaneity, and the destruction of binary oppositions, all which work to challenge dominant modes of thought. This challenge and the novel’s deeply postmodern impulses concerning identity, truth, and the constructed nature of narrative and self can perhaps best be summed up in Offred’s words. As she remarks early in the novel, while spending seemingly endless hours waiting, “I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (66). She embodies several identities at once, with glimpses of each emerging in different ways at different times; in this sense, Offred herself is a palimpsest.

## Conclusion

The notion of the palimpsest as the lens through which to explore *The Handmaid's Tale* is key to my analysis. A palimpsest is a piece of parchment from which the original writing has been partially erased or otherwise removed in order for a new text to be written. This practice was common in the Middle Ages, when Church officials repeatedly overlaid the writings of ancient Greece and Rome with religious texts; the most famous of these is the Archimedes Palimpsest, in which a 12<sup>th</sup> century liturgical text is written over the work of the Greek mathematician. In extended use, the term has come to mean any object or place that holds traces of its history and its previous incarnations. What is important about a palimpsest is that the previous text is never fully removed; it always leaves traces that complicate the 'new' text. Atwood herself suggests this concept in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale* on the novel's very first page, when describing the high school gymnasium that under the Gileadean regime, is now an indoctrination center for Handmaids: "dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style" (*HT* 3). The layering of cultural moments created by the Sons of Jacob's attempts to destroy the past that does not adhere to their conception of the present is similar to the original use of palimpsestic parchments; older texts were scraped away not only because of the limited availability of materials on which to write, but also because the original texts were either considered irrelevant and therefore not worth preserving, but also in attempts to destroy or sanctify pagan texts with Christian writing. Thus, it is not only the layering of one text with

another that is important to consider, but the order in which the layering occurs, and which texts are considered more valuable at any given moment. This is also true for the generic layering of *The Handmaid's Tale* – in particular, my choice to include the chapter on the novel's postmodernism last. If we were to imagine the genres as a sequential layering, satire would be written over historical novel, and postmodern would be written over those. Not only is it the most recent genre in terms of chronology, it is also the genre which is the most hybrid in its form, encompassing a vast array of other literary types and themes – it is, in short, the genre that is most complicated by previous texts.

My examination of the novel's layering of genres works to provide greater insights into the ways in which Atwood is interrogating the mid-1980s cultural milieu to which she was responding and from which she was writing. This impetus to find a deeper understanding of the novel's historical moment is connected to a fundamental aspect of the genres I discuss – that of social commentary. Historical novels, satire, postmodern texts, and the fascinating mix of those three that make up many a dystopian novel, all seek to understand the cultural, social, and political environment of the time in which they are written; these genres all work to offer commentary and criticism on the societies from which they spring.

This is the hallmark of dystopian fiction, and as mentioned earlier, *The Handmaid's Tale* invites comparison to the most well known dystopian novel, George Orwell's *1984*. Dystopian fiction, often set in the near future, imagines a world in which the most dangerous elements of the writer's present are exaggerated and hyperbolized; in *1984*, the Communist threat of the 1940s is distorted into Big Brother; in *The*

*Handmaid's Tale*, infertility scares and religious fundamentalism become The Republic of Gilead; in Atwood's 2003 dystopian novel *Oryx and Crake*, current issues such as climate change and genetic manipulation result in the near destruction of human beings as a species. What I find particularly fascinating about this genre is that while the goal is social commentary and a concern with broad political and social issues, the focus is always on an individual character who in some way resists the oppressive power structure. Winston Smith's thoughtcrimes and Offred's feigned belief in Gileadean ideology are deeply personal struggles, but they are also, in their societies that are predicated on thought control, deeply subversive. They are both traitors, and their treachery comes not in the form of violent revolutions against the government, but in their insistence to be, in any way possible, free in a drastically un-free world. Thus, Winston has an illegal affair with Julia, and Offred has an illegal affair with Nick. As Winston remarks after he and Julia have sex for the first time, their action could not be described as passionate or motivated by desire, but as "a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act" (Orwell 105). And as Offred remarks about her secret liaisons with Nick: "Being here with him is safety.... This is a delusion, of course. This room is one of the most dangerous places I could be" (Atwood 269 – 70). Under extreme circumstances, even the most personal of acts becomes a political statement; the most personal of moments becomes treason.

Dystopian fiction explores humanity's tendency to overwhelm itself with extremism through the lens of an individual who is gravely affected by the political machine. They serve as warnings; they seek to remind us that we are all affected in some

way by oppressive power structures. In an age when political apathy seems to be on the rise, even in this time of increased state surveillance and restrictions of civil liberties, it behooves us to return novels such as these that work to remind us that our very desires and freedoms as human beings are intricately bound to the power structures under which we live; what novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* remind us of, then, is that personal is indeed political.

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