



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati
Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e Postcoloniali

Tesi di Laurea

**A Critique of Contemporary World: Margaret
Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

Relatore

Ch. Prof. Shaul Bassi

Correlatore

Ch. Prof. Laura Tosi

Laureanda

Tanya Maratta

Matricola 831882

Anno Accademico

2017/2018

Table of contents

Introduction.....	1
I. The Handmaid's Tale as Dystopia.....	4
1.1. From Utopia to Dystopia.....	4
1.2. Writing Utopia.....	13
1.3. A Female Dystopia.....	16
1.3.1. The Legacy of <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	19
1.3.2. Language.....	20
1.3.3. Social Stratification.....	22
1.3.4. The Gileadean System of Terror.....	27
II. Historical Background.....	32
2.1. Why the United States?.....	32
2.1.1. A Puritan Heritage.....	34
2.1.2. A Colonial Heritage.....	36
2.2. Atwood's Historical Context.....	40
2.3. A Mirror Reflecting Reality.....	42
III. A Postmodern Approach.....	46
3.1. What is Postmodernism?.....	46
3.2. Resistance Through Narrating.....	49
3.3. Context is All.....	52
3.4. A Plurality of Perspectives.....	54
3.5. Offred's Meditation on Language.....	56
3.6. Unreliability of the Narrator.....	57
3.7. The Historical Notes.....	59
3.8. One Narrative Many Genres: a Gothic Dystopia.....	63
IV. A Feminist Reading of <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	67
4.1. The Feminist Movement: a Brief Overview.....	67
4.1.1. Atwood's Perspective.....	70
4.1.2. Atwood and the #MeToo movement.....	71
4.2. A Feminist Narrative.....	74
4.3. The Anti-Heroine: Offred.....	77
4.4. The Romance Plot.....	79
4.5. Positive Feminine Models.....	86

4.6. Wicked Women.....	88
4.7. A Critique of Second Wave Feminism.....	90
V. <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> Today.....	94
5.1. The TV show and Trump.....	94
5.2. <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> and the Environment.....	98
5.3. The TV Adaptation.....	101
Conclusion.....	105
Bibliography.....	110

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how Atwood's narrative allows its readers to meditate upon numerous issues that are affecting our contemporary world. With *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Canadian author offers us a new lens through which we can look at the world differently, thus becoming more aware of the dangers which surround us, in politics, in society, in the field of human rights and of environmentalism.

To do this, she makes use of a specific literary genre: dystopia. Thus, in the first chapter I explore the world of utopias and dystopias and some of the cornerstones of the genre that widely inspired the writing of *The Handmaid's Tale*, such as Huxley, Bradbury and especially Orwell.

As Atwood has repeatedly affirmed, adhering to the spirit of dystopias, in her narrative, she covers most of the happenings and events of human history. And indeed, in the chapter “Historical Backgrounds”, the thesis investigates all the historical facts the book refers to, from 1980s United States and America's colonial and Puritan past, to 20th-century European and Middle Eastern history.

When she decided to create a dystopian society, and to make it as closer to reality as possible, the question Atwood asked herself was: “what kind of totalitarianism would be established in the United States?”. The answer was the theocracy of Gilead. Inspired by the totalitarianisms of the 20th century, Atwood investigates the establishment and the functioning of a dictatorship, from its social hierarchy and its system of terror to submit its citizens, to the manipulation of language and of knowledge.

Being a very versatile writer, Atwood introduces certain novelties, skilfully employing some of the tropes of postmodern literary production, such as: the style and the structure of the narrative, with the first person narrator's limited perspective, a non-linear narration, a constant play with language and words, and the final revelation, through the “Historical Notes” chapter, that Offred's narrative is a historical source discussed by some historians during a symposium. Again, the trope of the found manuscript (in this case found tapes) gives Atwood the possibility to explore another important issue: the representation of history, the reliability of the sources, and the difficulties historians have to face in order to study sources and reconstruct history, as it is analysed in the third chapter.

Also, the tale is so rich that not only does it combine dystopian elements with

postmodern elements, but it also exploits many of the tropes of the gothic, with its description of places and situations. Actually, since postmodernism challenges all the notions of hierarchy, therefore the mixing of different genres is one of the main features of postmodern artistic production.

Conversely to its predecessors, the main protagonist is a marginalized member of society: a woman. The story also deals with several feminist issues. Surely, it denounces the mistreatment of women within society, the fact that they have always been considered inferior to men and therefore discriminated and often harassed. However, what must be really appreciated about Margaret Atwood, is her just vision of feminism. She openly advocates gender equality: women are not the angels in the house always right by nature, and men are not always the monsters who rape and harass them, perspective I totally agree with, but which is not very common among current feminists, especially with the birth of the #MeToo movement. In chapter IV, the thesis explores Atwood's position, mentioning the controversy arisen after she had advocated one of her colleagues accused of sexual misconduct, and demonstrates how *The Handmaid's Tale* can be also read as a critique of second wave feminism and of the limits of the movement. In her dystopian world, indeed, just as women, also many men lead a miserable life and have to respect the restrictions that the regime has imposed on them. Moreover, she brilliantly challenges the idea of the perfect and good woman by inserting many wicked female characters who harm other women.

In 2017, the premiere of the Hulu adaptation gave new life to Atwood's story. Immediately, the sales of the book increased, and the show was very successful among the audience, who entirely appreciated the work of Reed Morano and Bruce Miller. The most striking aspect of a story such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, is realizing how a book written and published in the 1980s, perfectly fits also the 2010s, and probably this provides an explanation for the immediate success of the TV series.

Thus, I decided to prove the connection between the story and our age. It was sufficient to gather as many newspaper articles written in the last few years as possible, to realize how both the book and the TV show seem a product of the 2010s. It was very easy to draw a parallel between the book and the current historical happenings of the last few years: from the election of a President such as Donald Trump, to terrorism and religious fundamentalism, to LGBT, female genital mutilation and environmental issues.

I. *The Handmaid's Tale* as Dystopia

1.1. From Utopia to Dystopia

As Margaret Atwood has stated there are several reasons that led her to write *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the first place her studies in 17th-century American puritan theocracy (a tendency that keeps spreading in the United States); all the political happenings in the United States in the 80s, one of them being the mobilization of the conservative christian ideology; and most importantly, the reading of literary dystopias such as those by Orwell, Huxley and Bradbury. Atwood wondered whether she could write a dystopia too, however switching the typical male perspective of the previous narratives. That is how Offred came to life in the female dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The term dystopia indicates an unpleasant imaginary society often subjected to a cruel dictatorship. This literary subgenre is in both an antithetic and interdependent relationship with the utopian world, where also the origin of dystopia lies. To better understand what dystopia has meant and still means in the contemporary world, it is necessary to go back in history and investigate what utopia meant for our ancestors. If dystopia signifies a negative context based on historical facts and set in a hypothetical future, utopia, on the contrary, denotes an unattainable ideal good society, not necessarily a future one.

As Dragan Klaic has explained in his work *The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama*, where he traces the history of the evolution of the concepts of utopia and dystopia, the future is a relatively current concern, especially starting from the Renaissance onwards. The preoccupation of prehistoric and ancient civilizations was the past and the myths of creation rather than the future, since their primary need was to gain an understanding about their identity. Many ancient cultures had an idea of time as being cyclical, so that the established order they knew was destined to collapse to give birth to a new order in a process expected to continue forever.

It is with Greek civilization that the idea of the future is associated with the concept of utopia, although it is not a spatial neither a temporal concept yet. Plato in his *Republic* unconsciously created a rudimentary form of utopia, where he developed his own idea of a wealthy, ordered and harmonious state. The utopian nature of Plato's work

resulted in his own awareness that this project would not see the light, at least not in a forthcoming future.

In the Middle Ages there was a shift of interest from collective future to individual destiny, and as a consequence, to individual death. What matters is the fate of individuals, rather than the doomsday of humanity. This view affected also the ideological direction of the Renaissance that put emphasis on individual's capabilities and achievements. Human beings were responsible for their own fate.

The new geographical discoveries of unknown lands were significant, since they expanded the world as it had been known until 1492 and gave Europeans the possibility to explore an alternative reality. An instance of this was the humanist Thomas More. At the beginning of the 16th century, More reconsidered Plato's *Republic*, and in his renowned work *Utopia* portrayed again a harmonious and ideal state where all its citizens live happily and in peace. More coined the word "utopia" using an interesting pun that provided the meaning of the word itself. The inspiration came from the Greek word *ou-topos* that means nowhere. At the same time there was a similar word *eu-topos* that means good place. Here utopia is a spatial concept, a faraway land isolated from 16th-century Europe where a new and alternative society could be established. More also paved the way for the development of the temporal concept of the future. In the Renaissance one of the main concerns was to create and organize a peaceful and prosperous society, wealthy and without social injustices for the future, and the only place where this could be achieved was the unspoiled wilderness of the newly discovered lands.

Later, during the Enlightenment, the triumph of reason and the new discoveries in the scientific field improved humanity's self-confidence. Looking at history, individuals were aware that human beings were capable of bettering themselves, therefore utopia could become a reachable goal, thanks to each individual's effort. The turning point came with the industrial revolution started in the second half of the 18th century. Innovations and technology became a synonym for health, wealth and abundance and the view of the future became increasingly optimistic. Therefore Utopia became a widespread literary genre that portrayed earthly paradises where humans could enjoy themselves and have all their desires fulfilled, or ideal states where society worked perfectly.

Starting from the 18th century, utopia appeared in various literary forms: in novel and also in short stories usually published in newspapers or magazines, becoming a

paradigm, a model to imitate by every nation in the world. Sometimes it also became a critical tool that exposed the flaws and the squalor of the society in which the author lived, exploring an alternative imaginary perspective (Klaic, 1991: 11-42).

Not only did this trend change towards the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century due to all historical catastrophes that occurred, but also, utopia was widely criticized, especially by the feminist movement. Even though they saw utopia as a useful means for their feminist purposes, they recognized that all the utopian literary production was deeply misogynistic, since, despite depicting an ideal world, it did not take into account issues of gender, race and postcoloniality. Equality of all men was one of the main goals utopias wished for, however this did not include women, since all female characters continued to be relegated to their traditional roles of mothers and housewives without any social right, living in a state of isolation within the walls of their houses. Therefore women writers started portraying non-patriarchal societies where women and men were equal and had the same civil rights, and the narrative was told through a female point of view for the first time, shifting the focus to female reality and everyday life and thus challenging patriarchy. One of the most famous female Utopias is the all-female society portrayed by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *Herland* (1915), for instance.

The 18th century is the century of the Enlightenment, of reason and rationality against ignorance, superstition and religion, considered the most evil of all persuasions. Moreover, unlike England, in France there was discontent with the political regime, absolute monarchy, and the ancient feudal system, what is known as Ancien Régime. Thus, with the storming of the Bastille on the 14th July 1789, the French Revolution started as the result of a long process that put rational way of thinking at its core, willing to realize the values upon which it was based, namely freedom, equality and brotherhood. Finally monarchy was abolished and Republic took its place. Soon, the Jacobins, the most influential political organization during the French Revolution and initially advocates of democratic initiatives, established the government known as Reign of Terror, through public violence such as guillotine, that culminated with Napoleon Empire in 1804. An utopian dream turning into a nightmare.

With the Industrial Revolution not only did British economical power increase through new advanced industrial machinery that made the middle class wealthier, but paradoxically, it also worsened life condition of that part of society at the lowest step of

the social stratification, the working class. Due to overcrowding in the cities, workers were forced to live with their large families in tiny dirty flats lacking of fresh air, often in one single room, being thus exposed to various diseases, such as tuberculosis and cholera. Working conditions were even worse, with working shifts of 12-14 hours, at least when overtime was not needed, very low wages, insufficient to maintain the whole family, and cruel discipline. Since women and children earned even lower salaries, employers preferred to hire them rather than men. The achievement of wealth and technological progress was not able to hide the dystopian side of industrialization, one of the greatest utopia of the 19th century.

During the last twenty years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century Europe witnessed a period of great splendour, known as the Belle Epoque, before experiencing the greatest tragedies ever occurred in human history. The outbreak of World War I in July 1914 marked the end of Europe as it was known hitherto and also brought a collapse of the existing social order. All young men regardless of their position in society were called to enlist in the Army, so that on the battle field there was no social hierarchy. All men were united to pursue a common goal. Actually, the war affected all social classes. Although the aristocrats continued to hold their power and position within society also after the end of the war, it is also true that they started losing their ancient prestige which had not to be taken for granted anymore: along with the industrial revolution's new businessmen and entrepreneurs who were successfully moving towards the top of the social hierarchy, those aristocratic families who were not able to keep up with the times economically, could lose their properties and peerage.

With the majority of men fighting at the front, there was a manpower shortage, therefore women had to abandon their role of housekeeper to substitute for their fathers, husbands and sons in the workplace.

Also, the Great War showed the dark side of humankind and of technological progress. Technology was not seen only as a positive means to achieve wealth anymore, but became also a lethal weapon that destroyed everything and killed millions of soldiers and civilians. As the first modern war, it introduced new technological weapons such as tanks, machine guns, submarines, poisonous gas, aerial bombs that made the war longer lasting with its exhausting trench war. On this background, how could humankind still have an optimistic vision of the future when witnessing such acts of barbarism? This further confirmed what was already well-known: man was not an altruistic, cooperative and peaceful creature, rather selfish, aggressive, violent and even

murderous when necessary for his own supremacy. Unfortunately, the worst was yet to come. The Great Depression taking place during the 1930s, the establishment of totalitarian regimes, such as Nationalist Spain, Nazism and Fascism in Germany and Italy respectively, the Second World War, the atomic bomb and the Holocaust prompted the spreading of dystopian thinking and the paralysis of utopianism.

Dystopia is mainly a phenomenon of the 20th century, however it had already appeared in the form of satire long before. Satire incorporated both utopian and dystopian elements, since it criticized current times while offering a positive alternative reality. Slowly, these two opposite elements were separated to give birth to two separate subgenres, that continued to be deeply interdependent. Still, the line between the two worlds is blurred. Often, what is considered an utopia by its author and by many of its followers, could be seen as a satire by other readers that may have a different approach to reality, and the opposite is also true.

A Dictatorship is a perfectly organized form of government which gathers all political powers in the hands of a single leader, the dictator, whose only concern is to ensure the integrity and the safety of his state and his people. The dictator primary aim is thus to realize his utopia of a wealthy and powerful nation, however suppressing basic human rights such as freedom and privacy, eliminating political opposers and often ethnic diversities considered inferior, to preserve racial purity. Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin and their numerous followers were an instance of this. What they considered an utopian project, became a dystopic nightmare for millions of european citizens.

After the Second World War, the Soviet Union and the United States were the two greatest powers in the world and utopian experiments, also protagonists of a geopolitical tension, the Cold War. The Soviet Union was seen as the fulfilment of utopian expextations of 19th century socialism. Soon, with the advent of Stalin and his totalitarian regime that exploited means such as gulags and secret police to mantain order and get rid of political opponents, all socialist hopes and ideals were immediately betrayed. Thus, socialists dissociated from Stalinism and proclaimed themselves "social democrats" and socialism seemed to be an inspiring set of values as far as it remained an unrealizable goal for the future.

The United States too, had always been the homeland of rights and ideals such as democracy, liberty, equality and oppurtunity giving birth to the American Dream: the United States as the land of wealth and success. In the 20th century, America could inspired both utopian and dystopian visions. It was not simply the land of

industrialization and capitalism, it became a powerful military power dominating the world in pursuit of global democracy. However, in doing so America has brought destruction around the world, trying to dissolve political forces, and often civilizations, considered enemies of American democratic way of thinking.

For many of the 19th-century thinkers, democracy, science and socialism were the modern tendencies that would allow the realization of utopia in the forthcoming future. Conversely, for dystopian thinkers they were the means that would bring hell on Earth. Dystopia is realistic rather than idealistic like utopia; while the latter's primary concern was making predictions about a possible impending situation based on current circumstances, dystopia felt there was not such a need, since the negative consequences of those contemporary tendencies was already evident in their present. After all, "the anti-utopia was often no more than a thinly disguised portrait of the contemporary world" (Kumar, 1987: 110).

This does not mean that dystopians were conservatives advocating hierarchy, religion, superstition and property. On the contrary, they deeply believed in values such as science, progress, rationality and equality, but it was their use that they distrusted and dismissed. There seemed to be no compatibility between practical reality and those principles. Every attempt to put them into practice has ended in the realization of the exact opposite of utopian promises. Dystopia did not have to invent anything. If some of the common denominators of Utopia are the defamiliarizing context and the creation of an ideal alternative to the present, the dystopian scenario is even too familiar.

The aim of utopia and dystopia is the same, to instil in its readers the desire for sociopolitical transformation, to improve the world where they live, however following two different paths. Utopia is the expression of humankind's greatest dreams and desires, and offers an alternative positive reality to compare with the social and political background of the author and his readers, whereas dystopia is the expression of human's deepest fears that those very dreams could become reality. Therefore, it portrays a distorted reality, the most negative picture of the present and of the future. Both utopia and dystopia ideate social orders. While in utopia the social order is perfect, the dystopian order is "the dreadful perfection of some modern system or idea" (Kumar, 1987: 125). Utopian societies are ideal, the best possible societies ever conceived, whereas dystopian societies represent the triumph of the tyranny of the ideas it was based upon. A world of delight versus a world of terror.

In the dystopian world every rare aspect of ordinary life is a breath of fresh air that

allows all its oppressed inhabitants to escape for a while the vice-like grip of the regime. In other words, since private life is not under the control of the individual anymore, but is continuously controlled by the state, every day objects that recall the past are precious. There is no space for emotional experiences, intimacy and individual bonding, thus ordinary life becomes utopia. In this sense, for instance, love or even sexual intercourse become an act of rebellion against the regime, such as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: the love affair between Julia and Winston is an instance, but also the act of making tea or of collecting old objects are the small details which allow Winston to retain “some hold on his sanity” (Kumar, 1991: 103).

The totalitarian state thus sacrifices individuality for a superior aim, the good of collectivity. On this background, the hero of the narrative initially conforms to the regime, but slowly he initiates a process of political awakening that leads to an act of rebellion against the central power. He starts struggling to distinguish himself from the nameless mass and to preserve his own right to be an individual capable of making choices on his own. And again Orwell's Winston Smith is an instance of this. But it is also worth mentioning Guy Montag in *Fahrenheit 451*: initially he is a committed fireman who strongly believes in his mission, but as he starts wondering why there are people ready to die in order to save their precious books, he also starts questioning the values of the regime. Unfortunately, this is an enterprise doomed to failure in front of the unstoppable power of the dictatorship, and inevitably, each citizen ends adhering to its rules and principles becoming an anonymous and insignificant piece of the social puzzle.

Dunja M. Mohr in her critical work *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* makes a thorough list of the stock topics dystopias deal with:

nationalism, militarism, slavery, exploitation, class antagonism, racism, barbarism, enforced and controlled gender relations, rape, overpopulation, drug dependence, sexual perversion, pogroms, degeneration, nuclear devastation, and increasingly also catastrophes such as (terminal) ecological pollution, and authoritarian/ totalitarian regimes that oppress the masses (2005: 33).

To achieve the goal of a perfect social order, the state exploits technology and the media to propagandize its ideas and principles, but also to control the spreading of information, to manipulate history and to brainwash citizens. The falsification of memory is a technique very much used, since it allows dictatorial regimes to erase uncomfortable memories or even difficult opponents. Stalin was perhaps the first to modify photographs. If an ally suddenly became an enemy, and if there was a photo that testified their previous alliance, that person was erased from the photo itself, so that a new version of the photo was created.

George Orwell believed that a new literary genre which could keep people informed, make them aware of the historical context they lived in and therefore awaken their conscience in order to effect change was needed. The genre he referred to was dystopia, and as a result he wrote his renowned book *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). In his narrative he portrays a totalitarian world, the superstate of Oceania, a world ruled by the Inner Party, Ingsoc, whose leader is the mysterious figure of Big Brother, where unfed people live in decaying and polluted cities and the regime has established a system of constant surveillance to suppress any act of rebellion, or perceived unorthodoxy, through tortures, forced labour camps and purges, thus preventing the possibility for intimate relationships. There is no space for privacy. Propaganda is the powerful means used by the regime to illegitimately distort historical truths to support the Party's agenda. For instance, Oceania is perpetually at war against either Eurasia or Eastasia, alliances always change due to what is more convenient in that specific moment. What is curious is that, after a new alliance is forged, the previous alliance has never existed and is literally erased from historiography, so that Oceania has always been on the side of its new ally.

The first impression a reader may have is that Orwell wrote science fiction, but actually Orwell simply described the functioning of a typical 20th-century dictatorship, mainly with its secret police, means of (false) propaganda, concentration camps, and the figure of a leader that embodies the ideology of the regime.

Whereas the citizens of Oceania live in poor conditions, conversely, the populace of both *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451* live in a wealthy world whose leading religion is that of consumerism. Here both regimes have created an illusory happiness, a society where every material comfort is provided, and as a consequence, citizens don't feel the need to rebel (obviously there are few exceptions).

In *Brave New World* citizens are engineered through artificial wombs to be Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta or Epsilon types, then they are conditioned at a State Conditioning Centre so that each individual will conform to their social status without feeling the desire to rebel or to challenge the prearranged order. In this way, the World State can maintain social stability without the employment of Secret Police or Telescreens.

Sexual intercourse is allowed as a form of entertainment, as long as it does not serve for reproductive purposes. In this society there cannot be intimate relationships between men and women, they are not allowed to get married, to love, to feel any kind of emotion. All degrees of kinship are abolished, there are no more mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers etc. When necessary, there is the possibility to take the "soma", an hallucinogenic drug that help people keeping peace and happiness in the society.

The price to pay for wealth is to renounce, to somehow destroy individuality and the possibility to feel emotions. Keeping people superficially happy is the only way that allows the functioning of economy, otherwise the system would collapse and thousands of citizens would starve to death.

In *Fahrenheit 451* also Ray Bradbury portrays an America devoted to consumerism (not so distant from real America), where books have been banned, since they are envisioned as a powerful tool against oppression, threatening the dehumanizing capitalistic system established in the country. Books may indeed instigate citizens to think freely and independently, to open their mind.

Like in all totalitarian regimes, there are dissidents who do not want to conform and still keep books secretly hidden in their houses, this is why there are firemen designated not to extinguish fire, rather to set fire to books, to destroy them and also the houses that were concealing them. Unfortunately, at the time of the narrative, firemen have become almost unnecessary, American culture has been so deeply dumbed down by television and especially by the superficial and mediocre contents it offers, that the majority of citizens themselves do not feel the will or even the need to rebel. They prefer to pass their time sitting on the sofa completely absorbed while watching those large television screens on the walls. Also here there is a lack of emotions, an illusory stability. Now, firemen's role is merely symbolic, "the masses lack the intellectual power to appreciate the books that are being burned" (Brooker, 2013: 73), and they are indifferent to the destruction of the classic literary heritage.

On these three backgrounds, there are some recurrent elements. Winston Smith in

Nineteen Eighty-Four, John and Helmholtz Watson in *Brave New World*, and Guy Montag in *Fahrenheit 451* are the heroes who challenge and rebel against the totalitarian regimes and finally face the villains in an engaging dialogue, the Inner Party member O'Brien, Controller Mustapha Mond and Fire Captain Beatty respectively, who on the one hand perfectly embody the orthodoxy of the regime, but on the other hand they feel sympathy for the rebels, since, at least Mond and Beatty have been rebels themselves in the past, even though they failed therefore preferring to sacrifice their values to become a powerful mechanism of the totalitarian machine.

Soon, with the emerging of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s, women joined the literary dystopian world, both as writers and protagonists. Female dystopian writers explored the issue of sexual politics, reconsidering the meaning of masculinity and femininity. In the 1980s this phenomenon even increased, since many of the political goals and social benefits achieved thanks to the previous feminist battles were annulled, such as reproductive and abortion rights. Society was not ready to welcome women in its public life yet, and gender equality continued to be an utopia for a long time: women could be only housekeepers, mothers and breeders, since they were considered unable to make a career for themselves.

Inspired by their contemporary background, female dystopias portrays a patriarchal world that has alienated women abolishing all their civil rights. Female writers adhere to the rules of the dystopian genre, addressing issues such as:

sexual polarization, restrictive gender roles, female textual/actual absence, the cult of superior masculinity and the essential inferiority of femininity, lesbianism/homosexuality, misogyny, patriarchy, patriarchal views of femininity, the male gaze, patrilinearity, male violence against women, female complicity, and sexism inherent in phallogocentric language (Mohr, 2005: 36)

and presenting them from a new feminine perspective.

1.2. Writing Utopia

When many readers and critics classified *The Handmaid's Tale* as Science Fiction for its future scenario, in *Writing Utopia* Margaret Atwood replied:

I define science fiction as fiction in which things happen that are not possible today- that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel, time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or that contain various technologies we have not yet developed. But in *The Handmaid's Tale*, nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past, or that it is not doing, perhaps in other countries, or for which it has not yet developed the technology. [...] and the projected trends on which my future society is based are already in motion. (2005: 92)

In her essay Atwood also provides her own overview about the history of dystopia. One of the main features that characterizes dystopia is its representation of reality. Much of what the author describes in his, or her, dystopian world is based on historical truth, and so it is *The Handmaid's Tale* that perfectly fits the dystopian literary genre.

Atwood has highlighted how utopias and dystopias are a product of monotheistic religions, or at least of cultures that have only one idea of the Good, while they are not a concern of cultures that believe in the circularity of time: since history is destined to repeat itself, trying to improve society is useless. Thus, many of the fictional utopias we read are produced by Judeo-Christianity, who attempted to create a real utopia on Earth, the advent of the Pilgrim Fathers being an example. While modern utopias are based on Plato's Republic, modern dystopias are inspired by literary representations of Hell, such as those of Dante and Milton.

The Utopia-Dystopia form allows us to try things out on paper to see if we could like them. In this sense, both are necessary since we first have to understand what we want, otherwise we will obtain what we would not want. Utopia portrays the world how it should be, but it is something we can only imagine, while dystopia is believable because it is inspired by happenings which have occurred or are still occurring on Earth.

However, it is easy for a utopia to become a dystopia. When not all citizens agree with the new established social and economic system, it is necessary to suppress and to terrorize them in order to maintain order. At this point, we do not have an utopia anymore, rather a dystopic society. Thus, utopia, as the name suggests, should stay nowhere and on the pages of books. Utopian and dystopian literature may seem two distant worlds, one designing a good society, the other a bad one, but actually they are intertwined in many ways. In an article Atwood wrote for *The Guardian*, she used the concept “ustopia”, a word that she “made up by combining utopia and dystopia [...] because [...] each contains a latent version of the other.” (2011). Both represent arranged societies regulated by systems of social control and punishment for those that rebel against the society and do not adapt. Historically, utopian hopes have always led to a Hell on Earth. Utopias could quickly transform into their opposites, as the Commander himself replies to Offred's complaint against Gilead: “Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some” (Atwood, 1996: 222). “Dystopias are often more like dire warnings than satires, dark shadows cast by the present into the future. They are what will happen to us if we don't pull up our socks.” (Atwood, 2005: 94). Atwood has thus listed the main concerns writers deal with in their dystopias:

the distribution of wealth; labor relations; power structures; the protection of the powerless, if any; relations between the sexes; population control; urban planning, often in the form of an interest in drains and sewers; the rearing of children; illness and its ethics; insanity ditto, the censorship of artists and suchlike riffraff and antisocial elements; individual privacy and its invasion; the redefinition of language; and the administration of justice- if, that is, any such administration is needed (2005: 94).

On this last subject, neither utopias nor dystopias feature any lawyers: in a utopian society they are not necessary, in a dystopic society they are not allowed, since it is a tyranny where there is no possibility for disagreement, the regime establishes one single truth that has to be true for every citizen.

The Handmaid's Tale was Margaret Atwood's first dystopian work. She was aware

that it was a risk, but having read so much about the topic and being also a lover of the genre, she began her literary adventure in the dystopian world in the spring of 1984, while in Berlin thanks to a fellowship, in a city that was suffering as being divided by the Berlin Wall as an aftermath of the end of the Second World War.

While writing her novel, she experienced some forms of totalitarianisms when visiting East Berlin, Poland and Czechoslovakia, under the Communist influence of the Soviet Union at that time. Formally, the two states were not part of the Soviet Union, they were independent, but actually they were satellite states, politically, economically and militarily controlled by the Soviet Union. She completed the narrative in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where, conversely, she encountered a democracy that however allowed constraining social customs and attitudes. Moreover, she read books on totalitarian regimes, literature of the Second World War, such as Winston Churchill's memoirs, the biography of Rommel and many others about military history:

This “political” area of my reading was reinforced later by travel to various countries where, to put it mildly, certain things we consider freedoms are not universally in force, and by conversations with many people; I remember in particular meeting a woman who had been in the French Resistance during the war, and a man who had escaped from Poland at the same time (Atwood, 2005: 96).

Also, as she constantly reminds us, Margaret Atwood was born in 1939, a crucial year in a period of history that witnessed the worst tragedies ever occurred, the Second World War, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, just to mention some of them. Even though she was only a child, she was conscious enough to understand what was happening. They were formative events in her life.

Margaret Atwood recognizes utopias and dystopias as products of the moral rather than the literary sense, indeed, as a literary genre, they have also a didactic purpose. In order to understand those texts, it is necessary to have a knowledge of the cultural and social context in which they were produced. *The Handmaid's Tale*, representing a future America, is a warning against the threats of environmental pollution, religious fundamentalism and state surveillance, what could happen if people do not act to prevent further damages. She wants to shock readers, making them aware of the

dangerous trends that are present in the current world. However, the impulse to always imagine the worst is either intrinsic to human nature or perhaps it could be culturally determined, rooted in all religious practices and ancient myths

1.3. A Female Dystopia

Margaret Atwood has always been an enthusiastic reader of dystopian novels. She began with Thomas More's *Utopia*, successively she started exploring the world of dystopias with the reading of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, just to mention only a few of them. Although there were already dystopian and utopian novels by and about women, such as Katharin Burdekin's *Swastika Night* or Gilman's *Herland*, even though in small quantity, the dystopian world belonged mostly to men. Thus, wondering whether she was able to write a dystopia too, she challenged the traditionally masculine dystopian literature, switching the typical male point of view and giving voice to a woman who has been relegated to the margins of political power in *The Handmaid's Tale*. It deals with the encroachment on basic human rights, especially the oppression of women under a totalitarian regime.

Why *The Handmaid's Tale* can be considered a dystopia? The narrative summarizes Atwood's political, social, and environmental concerns through the representation of a fictitious future America where the birth rate has decreased because of pollution and environmental destruction, and as a consequence, a theocracy that exploits women as breeders has established. The scenario occurs roughly around 2005, and Offred, the protagonist and also storyteller, being 33 year-old when she becomes an Handmaid, must have been born in the 1970s. She is entrapped in a totalitarian regime that does not grant her any possibility of agency. She has been deprived of her own identity and name, of course, Offred is not her real name, but her slave name that refers to her function in Gilead; indeed it indicates property, and she is a property of her commander Fred.

The starting point for the conception of the narrative lies in some questions that Margaret Atwood asked herself: "if you were attempting a totalitarian takeover of the United States, how would you do it? What form would such a government assume, and what flag would it fly?" (2011).

The Republic of Gilead is a Christian fundamentalism and can be easily considered

as a development of 20th-century United States, since they share many similarities. This regime has been achieved within a single generation, therefore its citizens still remember about the pre-Gileadean America, that reminds us of modern U.S.. For instance, Offred's encounter with Serena Joy, the commander's wife, is like going back in history. Serena was a televangelist and a gospel singer in the pre-Gileadean society, who also contributed to the coup d'état. Since Offred knows that the rise of the televangelists marked the fall of America, she is able to draw a comparison between the young Serena Joy and the melancholic woman who stands in front of her now at the commander's house. This gulf recalls the gulf between the author's present time when she wrote the novel and Offred's. (Bolton, 2009: 60). The author's present time, the 1970s and 1980s, becomes Offred's past through the creation of a fictional future, that should occur at the beginning of the 21th century, around 2005.

Offred's generation, such as the Commander, Serena Joy, Ofglen and Moira, is the link between the past and the present of the narrative, and the memories they have about their past describe the United States of the 1980s, when the book was written and published. While they see Gilead as a deviation from the norm and they are able to see its perversion, for the new generation, such as Offred's daughter, Gilead is the norm because they have known nothing different from it.

Even though sometimes it could be ground for nostalgia and thus suffering, Offred's past can be also considered the utopia within the dystopia, a happy place where she can escape and hide from her miserable present. The past is not perfect, however, compared to the dramatic future she is experiencing, it is a much better scenario, a good society after all.

At the end of the narrative, Professor Pieixoto provides also a brief overview of the world historical background at the time Gilead took the power, a rather apocalyptic scenario. The end of the 20th century seemed to have marked an arms stalemate between all the world superpowers after a long exhausting world war. The superpowers signed “the Spheres of Influence Accord which left the superpowers free to deal, unhampered by interference, with the growing number of rebellions within their own empires” (Atwood, 1996: 318). Thus, the Republic of Gilead was free to perpetrate its atrocious crimes.

When Offred starts telling her narrative, the Republic of Gilead had already established for some time, but at a certain moment of her tale she informs us how

Gilead took the power:

It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time. [...] they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets (Atwood, 1996: 182-183).

Interestingly, the Gileadeans promptly blamed their act of rebellion on Islamic fundamentalists, a mechanism that is not new to us that live in the contemporary world: one group of religious extremists blaming another for endangering their own country and lifestyle. Like every dictatorship, the new regime gradually abolishes all human and civil rights, establishing a system of secret police and of torture to prevent acts of rebellion and to maintain order for the good of the whole community.

The narrative does not provide information about the process that led these Christian fundamentalists to establish a new political order, however in the historical notes, Professor Pieixoto explains why there is a dramatic decrease of the birth rate that made necessary the establishment of such a social system, thus exposing one of Atwood's main concerns about contemporary world:

this was the age of the R-strain syphilis and also the infamous AIDS epidemic [...] Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the 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 illegal and illegal [...] and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays (Atwood, 1996: 316-317).

Unfortunately, what professor Pieixoto describes is not so far from the effects that human activity has had on the biophysical environment during present time. Atwood,

being a committed environmental activist, here mentions one of the greatest issues of the 21th century, the actual threat of a definitive natural disaster.

1.3.1. The Legacy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Orwell has been Margaret Atwood's greatest inspiration for the writing of *The Handmaid's Tale*, her first dystopia. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell explores the way in which totalitarian regimes affirm and maintain their power by controlling every state apparatus and all its citizens, not only their lives but also their minds. Even though the two novels are products of two different historical periods, the 1940s and the 1980s, and therefore they portray two different future scenarios, Atwood follows a similar path in her narrative with some significant differences. The *Handmaid's Tale* is a first person narrator account of the predicaments undergone by a suppressed member of society. And female.

While Offred is confined within the domestic sphere, far from the political life of the regime, Winston Smith is part of it, he is an unwilling collaborator of the regime. He works at the Ministry of Truth, the ministry of propaganda. He reads and writes constantly to destroy troublesome historical sources and consequently creating new historical “truths” that would agree with the politics of the regime. This idea of false propaganda emerges also in Offred's narrative, when she realizes that the televised news may be invented. Thus, Winston is aware of the nightmarish world he lives in, surrounded by television screens and posters showing the face of a man (halfway between Hitler and Stalin) and the slogan “Big Brother is watching you”, and has a detailed knowledge of the policies of the regime. Being a marginal character, Offred has a superficial knowledge of Gilead and how the system works, and since the story is presented through her own perspective, readers know only what Offred witnesses and describes. Offred's narrative focuses mainly on her predicaments, describing her daily life, her feelings and her thoughts, and commenting on what she observes and experiences. Orwell shows to be more interested in the mechanisms of politics and power, and in the relationship between the private and the public spheres. Atwood concentrates on the world of the silenced others, giving voice to someone whose freedom of speech has been denied. However, both Offred and Winston are ordinary people dissatisfied with the dictatorial system they live in, and readers can easily identify with them.

Gileadean propaganda and manipulation of language can be easily compared with the Newspeak of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The newspeak follows the grammatic rules of standard English, but as far as vocabulary is concerned, new words have been introduced and many undesirable words have been literally eliminated. The purposes of Newspeak are not only to provide a means of expression for the citizens of Oceania in line with the ideology and politics of the regime, but also to make all other modes of thought impossible, especially rebellious and heretical thoughts. Margaret Atwood imitated this idea in her narrative, since she understood the importance of language in the dynamics of power, an instrument to manipulate individuals.

The end of the protagonists' narratives differs completely. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston and Julia are defeated by the system that has suppressed them. They are brutally questioned, tortured and brainwashed into loving the Big Brother. Orwell's ending suggests that there is no possibility of victory in dictatorships, in dystopias rebellions are doomed to fail. Offred's faith is unknown, she gets in the black van going towards either her liberation or her punishment (even though the Historical Notes suggest that she survived). However the sure thing is that she never comes to embrace the Republic of Gilead or to love the Commander, symbol of the regime.

After the end of Offred's narrative, there's a section: the "Historical Notes". This final section is the transcript of a symposium held in the future, where Gilead does not exist anymore, and has thus become a subject of academic research. Again *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been a source of inspiration for Atwood. Indeed, Orwell's novel has a similar final chapter: an essay entitled "The Principles of Newspeak", which analyses the theory of a language, conversely to the "Historical Notes", which "critique the "discourses" of academia (Jadwin, 2010: 36).

1.3.2. Language

Undoubtedly, language is essential in the manipulation of truth and in the process of thought control. Language shapes ideas and thoughts that individuals are capable of conceiving in their mind. Therefore, for a regime it is of great importance to alter the structure of language in order to control individuals' thoughts in turn, thus preventing them from formulating rebellious and hostile thoughts, since there would not be appropriate words to express such feelings anymore. Language is one of the strongest means of power, a fundamental piece in the mechanism of persuasion, through which

totalitarian regimes manipulate their citizens' minds. The final goal is the complete elimination of individual consciousness in order to protect and preserve the totalitarian regime and its authority.

Neologisms, the invention of new words and concepts that represent a new social reality, and transignification, when traditional meanings of words are reassigned, are rather common in dystopian novels. For instance, among the neologisms there are: “Prayvaganzas”, “compuchecks” or “econowives”. But also the elimination of old words, such as “sterile”, since men cannot be sterile, there are only either fertile or barren women.

In *The Handmaid's Tale's* society biblical references pervade every level of language. The regime is aware that language is a repressive instrument that plays a leading role in the ideological control. For instance, the very name of Gilead is taken from the thirty-first chapter of Genesis, where Jacob steals Laban's daughters and take them to the country of Gilead. Likewise, Offred and her daughter are stolen from their previous lives and are placed in a new and unwanted life. Important figures responsible for the observance of the law are named after Bible characters, such as the “Guardian Angels” or the “Eyes of the Lord”. Handmaids' function derive from the Bible, and Marthas are named after the woman who served Christ. Jezebel was the name of a biblical figure, a cruel, malicious phoenician princess associated with promiscuity. Not without reason, the name of the state sanctioned brothel is Jezebel's, as to suggest the scandal of female sexuality.

Aunt is a term that should suggest a sense of protection and safety, however, ironically, Gilead has used it to name the most ruthless female social class of the regime, indeed they collaborate with the regime to indoctrinate the Handmaids. Moreover, many of their name have biblical origins: Lydia was a woman mentioned in the New Testament, the first case of conversion to Christianity; Elizabeth was the mother of John the Baptist; Sara was the half-sister and wife of Abraham.

To control citizens' minds, Aunts have parodied Christ's words “The kingdom of God is within you”: “Gilead is within you” (Atwood, 1996: 33). “From each [...] according to her ability; to each according to his needs” (Atwood, 1996: 127) is another misappropriation that Aunt Lydia asserts is biblical, from St Paul. However this slogan comes from Karl Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, and it describes his idea of systems of production.

The oppressive power of language is also evident in some standard expressions that

Handmaids are forced to say in greeting: “Blessed be the fruit” and “May the Lord open”. These expressions are meant to always remember Handmaids what is their purpose within society, with the “fruit” signifying a child, whereas the farewell “Under His Eyes” reminds citizens that they are constantly controlled by the regime. Speaking about significant issues is forbidden. Even the Wives have lost their control over speech, they are silenced too. Paradoxically, even men of the ruling classes suffer the limitation of discourse, as Offred notes when speaking about the Commander: “Still, it must be hell, to be a man, like that. [...] It must be very silent” (Atwood, 1996: 99). Even Commanders, belonging to the powerful elite, are “constrained by the repression they impose on others. Political repression, fear, caution, contribute to the silence of Gilead. But emotional repression is the root of silence” (Stein, 2012: 265).

With *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood clearly demonstrates how “social systems fail if language fails to mean. [...] impediments to communication paralyze culture in a comprehensive way” (Murphy, 2012: 234).

1.3.3. Social Stratification

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Margaret Atwood explores the functioning of power politics of gender and human relationships, the structure of oppressions both within the private and public sphere. In her opinion “Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it: it pervades everything we are and do”, it influences all relationship between individual within society. As she has explained, politics deals with how individuals order their societies and who is considered to have power. Power is a notion socially constructed, certain members of society have power because others confer it to them. It is a matter of “who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it” (Atwood, 1996: 145). This is what humankind has always been used to.

The Republic of Gilead is a fascist and patriarchal theocracy that combines Christian fundamentalism, misogyny and racism. Its elite uses its own brand of Bible-based religion to justify the human rights abuses they perpetrate. After their conquest of power over the United States, all its citizens have been classified into social classes according to their function. Women is the most oppressed category of society. The majority of them are deprived of all power, confined to the domestic sphere and excluded from the political structure. However there are some exceptions, even though for most of them is only an illusory sense of freedom. As Eleonora Rao has underlined,

in *The Handmaid's Tale* the “hierarchical structure of the state is reflected in the households where people behave according to the amount of power they have been granted” (1993: 16-17). The mechanism of power politics is at work also in the domestic sphere, all members of society are entrapped in the role assigned to them by the regime, especially women, who cannot aspire to improve their condition, and those at the top of the social stratification could lose their privileged position if they dissociate from the regime. Not only does this social structure marginalize and eliminate women, but also people belonging to other religious faiths, or ethnically different, whoever does not embody the American Christian white, such as the Children of Ham, the Republic's name for African-Americans: “Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule [...] Three thousand have arrived this week in National Homeland One [...] Lord knows what they're supposed to do, once they get there. Farm, is the theory” (Atwood, 1993: 94), or the Quakers, Roman Catholic priests and homosexuals, considered heretics and therefore arrested and executed. Jews are the luckiest people, since:

they were declared Sons of Jacob and therefore special, they were given a choice. They could convert, or emigrate to Israel. A lot of them emigrated, [...] some other people got out that way, by pretending to be Jewish [...] You don't get hanged only for being Jew though. You get hanged for being a noisy Jew who won't make the choice (Atwood, 1996: 210-211).

Men and women live segregated, any contact, interaction or exchange of opinions is severely limited and restricted, even between members of the same social or gender group.

In her depiction of this imaginary American society, Margaret Atwood has moved beyond simply feminist concerns, rather, she investigates the violation of basic human rights and also desires. The regime, besides criminalising violence against women and women's sexuality, like in other important dystopias, denies the possibility of intimacy and love, considered a very powerful subversive force.

At the top of the female hierarchy there are the Wives, recognisable for their blue

uniform. Wives constitute the social elite, they are married to the Commanders, who hold the top position within the male hierarchy. Usually wives are barren or they are experiencing menopause, so they cannot give birth to children. Even though they are high-ranking citizens, they only dominate the domestic sphere, but they are excluded from the public sphere where they do not hold any political power. They live empty lives, forced to observe their husbands having sexual intercourses with their handmaids, thus they try to fill their existence with occasional celebrations, meetings with other Wives, sewing or knitting scarves for the Angels at the front lines. As Offred herself highlights, these seem to be occupations provided by the government only to keep them busy, “to give them a sense of purpose” (Atwood, 1996: 23). Or they even “get sick a lot [...] It adds interest to their lives. (Atwood, 1996: 162). However at home “the transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone” (Atwood, 1996: 170).

The Aunts, wearing brown uniforms, are the other social class who is invested with some power. They are old menopausal unmarried women whose duty is to indoctrinate the Handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Reeducation Centre and to conduct and supervise public executions. In short, they are the only female collaborators of the regime, a paramilitary organisation. They are allowed to read and write, a rare privilege. They exercise their power through fear and also physical violence. As professor Pieixoto has observed, many of them decide to serve as Aunts because they actually believe in the values they promulgate, however many others become Aunts for the benefits they could acquire from such a privileged position. After all, “When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting” (Atwood, 1996: 320), moreover they avoid certain death.

The Handmaids are recognizable for their nun-like attire, consisting of a crimson dress and a white wimple that frames their face. They have been deprived of their identity, and significantly, as soon as they start serving as Handmaids in a Commander's house they are given a new name, such as Offred, Ofglen and Ofwarren, that is composed of the Commander's name and the suffix “of” that indicates possession. Actually they are not considered individuals anymore, rather “two-legged wombs” (Atwood, 1996: 146), objects that can be owned. The Handmaids are women who were either unmarried, or whose marriage was considered void in Gilead: for instance Offred and Luke marriage. Luke is a divorced man, and divorces are not considered legal anymore. Since they are the only fertile women left in Gilead, they are assigned to

Commanders' houses where they are forced to have sex with Commanders only to get pregnant. If after three attempts they fail, the regime blames only women who are immediately declared Unwomen and thus sent to the Colonies where they will die. They are nothing more than sexual slaves, deprived of privacy, freedom and of any private property, and they are brutally punished, hit and mutilated whether they do not humbly submit to the system. Confined to their bedrooms, and not even allowed to read and write, the Handmaids lead a miserable and boring life, where the main sources of excitement are public ceremonies. The reason that justifies the employment of the handmaids for reproductive purposes lies in a famous passage from the Genesis, also quoted in the preface of the narrative:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her (Genesis, 30:1-3).

The Marthas, in a dull green dress, are elder, sterile servants who are responsible for cooking and cleaning, the household is their realm. Incapable of bearing children, Marthas are invisible members of society, "nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha"(Atwood, 1996: 19). Like the Handmaids, their life is constantly precarious, they cannot take the liberty of being taken ill, it would prove fatal. They "avoid illness. The Marthas don't want to be forced to retire, because who knows where they go? You don't see that many old women around any more" (Atwood, 1996: 162-163).

At the very bottom of the social hierarchy there are the Econowives, the Unwomen and the prostitutes of Jezebel's. The Econowives, recognizable for their cheap striped red, blue and green dress, are married to the poorer men. Their multicoloured uniforms indicates that they are not divided into several functions, but they have to perform all the tasks usually assigned to different social categories, as explained hitherto. Their existence is endangered, "Some day, when times improve, says Aunt Lydia, no one will have to be an Econowife" (Atwood, 1996: 54). If Handmaids do not fulfill their function within three assignments, or if they do not conform to their breeding role, they

are inevitably classified as Unwomen and sent to the colonies to clean up toxic waste, where they are starved to death.

The prostitutes at Jezebel's are both real prostitutes from the time before, and common women, such as sociologists or lawyers, who preferred becoming prostitutes to the colonies. Unfortunately, Jezebel's is the final leg of their journey since “nobody gets out of here except in a black van” (Atwood, 1996: 255). Here, Gilead's unsuccessful rebels entertain high-ranking officers also through drinks and drugs. Jezebel's represents the hypocrisy of the Republic of Gilead. Brothels should be strictly forbidden, but only officially: in Gilead continue to exist exclusive clubs where men could pay to have sex with prostitutes, like in the old times, because, as the Commander points out, men, by design, need variety, it's part of the Nature's plan. What was once a hotel, is now a state-sanctioned brothel, even pimped by the Aunts, so that the social elites are allowed to satisfy all their perversions now illegal for the regime. The Commanders preach that sexual intercourses are necessary only to procreate, the transgressors may be legally punished, however they regularly resort to the prostitutes at Jezebel's.

Commanders are at the top of the whole social hierarchy, both feminine and masculine. Being the founders of the Republic of Gilead, they control every category of society, however their precise political role within the regime is not very clear, they are mainly representative of the Gileadean system of beliefs and the embodiment of male power. A social hierarchy exists also among Commanders, as Offred herself notices, while at Janine's Commander's house “Ofwarren's Commander must be higher status than ours” (Atwood, 1985: 125). Despite their high position in society, Commanders have to respect rules too. Interestingly, they have to ask permission to enter the sitting room knocking at the door since it is the Wife's domain. Also, in the narrative they are not described as cruel tyrants abusing their power, conversely they are gentle, sometimes it seems that they are trapped in that severe society too.

One of the most important apparatus of all dictatorships is the Secret Police. In Gilead the Eyes control every member of society, from Handmaids to Commanders, regardless of their social status, in order to stop any illicit activity against the new government. Then there are the Angels, the military apparatus of Gilead.

At the bottom, there are the Guardians of the Faith in their green uniforms. They are not real soldiers, rather “They're used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden for instance, and they're either stupid or

older or disabled or very young” (Atwood, 1985: 30). Sometimes, this is only their cover to hide that actually, they are Eyes incognito.

Whereas women are entrapped in their role and they cannot aim for an improvement of their condition, the male hierarchy allows a certain upward mobility. Guardians can marry only if they are promoted to the rank of Angels, and Angels can have their own Handmaid only if they are promoted to the rank of Commanders. On the other hand however, no one is exempt from the regime restrictions, neither Commanders nor their wives.

Each category of society either despises other social classes, considering them morally inferior, as in the case of the Marthas who openly disapprove the Handmaids activities, or envies the possession and privileges of the other classes.

1.3.4. The Gileadean System of Terror

To maintain the social order and class division, dictatorships tend to suppress individuality, making social life uniform, and so does Gilead, through public rituals and ceremonies.

To discourage dissidents from organizing protests and acts of rebellion, Gilead has established a rigid penalty system that instils terror in its citizens with the help of strict surveillance, tortures, mutilation and concentration camps. As an admonition for its audience, sanctioned violence is public, and it is also broadcasted. For minor convictions the punishment are amputations, while for more serious crime the verdict is death. This system also drags the same citizens into its disturbing mechanism, making them complicit, both active and passive participants in these collective ceremonies.

At Men's Salvaging (a pun on salvaging and savage), dissidents accused of endangering Gilead's religious beliefs and its control of society, sexuality and sexual reproduction, are publicly hanged, to prevent the spreading of rebellious sentiments. To make this message even more persuasive, many of the dead bodies are successively hanged at the Wall in town as a reminder for everyone. Among the corpses there could be individual belonging to different social classes, guilty of being gynecologists practising illegal abortions, homosexuals, seen as gender traitors, or members of other religious faiths. Every regime, in order to affirm its right to rule, must find its own scapegoats.

Women's salvagings work differently. The Handmaids become the reluctant

executioners, and they hang the culprits, who are not only members of the inferior classes but also high-ranking women, such as Wives. Meanwhile, the Wives witness these executions and the Aunts supervise the killing.

At Particution, another horrendous Gileadean spectacle, Handmaids have the opportunity to unleash their repressed rage against poor men, falsely accused of rape or infanticide, who actually are rebels, members of the resistance, the so-called Mayday. Again, the Handmaids become active collaborators of the Gileadean Republic, by taking part in such atrocities, killing men and women who were secretly organising to save all the downtrodden citizens of the regime. Here lies the perversion of Gilead. In the first place, it is evident the manipulation of truth typical of all dictatorships. To manipulate the truth, means also to manipulate, in turn, all the citizens, to keep them ignorant; on the other hand, being the suppression of freedom one of the pillars of dictatorial regimes, Gilead grants its victims an illusion of freedom. Moreover,

To kill, the handmaids need to reduce the male subject to an object and hence participate in the same dehumanizing dualism that oppresses them. The annihilation of the *other* presupposes the dissociation of the self from the other, the negation of humanity. (Mohr, 2005: 248).

Killing the other also means to kill any feeling of empathy, compassion that should be part of humankind.

Also the concept of freedom has been skilfully manipulated, as Aunt Lydia highlights while brainwashing the Handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center: “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” (Atwood, 1996: 34). Freedom to, or positive freedom, means that the individual has the wish to be his own master, to be free to choose, to make decisions that depend on his own will and not on external forces. The individual is a subject moved by his own reasons and conscience, not by other men's ones. Negative freedom means to be free from external interference. According to this concept, the only way to achieve freedom is by removing obstacles. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Handmaids are deprived of the freedom to do whatever they want when they want to do

it, even ordinary activities, such as going out for a walk, going shopping or reading, activities that in the pre-Gileadean US were taken for granted, but now are severely prohibited, however they were potential victims of abuses. In Gilead, being a precious property of the state for their role as breeders, Handmaids are a protected social category. In other words, the concept “freedom from” signifies protection, security, they cannot be raped, sexually harassed or even killed: Wives may be hanged for having murdered a Handmaid. “Atwood undermines the appeal of Gileadean 'freedom from', however, at the end of the novel, when Offred and the Commander go to Jezebel's” (Jadwin, 2010: 31). Women who do not obey and respect their role are no longer protected: they are either forced to become prostitutes, thus being exposed to rape and abuse, or they are mutilated as punishments. Moreover, actually, rape has been institutionalized and Sexuality politicized with the Ceremony.

Unfortunately, during the years under Gilead regime, Offred shows how the brainwashing operated by the regime has been so efficient that she herself has partly and unwittingly yielded. Despite her struggles to resist, she experiences a weakening of her desire for freedom: “Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure” (Atwood, 1996: 143). Also, while walking on the street accompanied by Ofglen as usual, they meet some tourists coming from Japan wearing a western attire, very short skirts, high-heeled shoes, their heads uncovered, red lipstick. At first, both Offred and Ofglen “are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed”, but soon Offred, accustomed to her crimson robes and white wimples she has to wear under orders of the state, realizes “I used to dress like that. That was freedom. Westernized, they used to call it” (Atwood, 1996: 38).

The manipulation of truth is also evident in the media. Media manipulation is a very efficient method to make people think or do what they otherwise would not, this is why dictatorial regimes always falsify information for the achievement of their own purposes, or also to reassure its citizens that a war is likely to be won to avoid a rebellion, for instance, to maintain order within the community. While watching the news, Offred is aware of this process: “They show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news? Possibly he's an actor. [...] He (the anchorman) tells us what we long to believe.” (Atwood, 1996: 93).

Another practice carried out by the Aunts while re-educating the Handmaids, is the Testifying. Women, all gathered in a room of the Centre and supervised by the Aunts, are forced to confess imaginary sexual crimes, such as rape, (even though it is not truth)

taking the blame for the crime. Offred remembers Janine (later Ofwarren) describing when she was gang-raped and also had an abortion. Disturbingly, after the confession Aunt Helena said “But whose fault was it? [...] *Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison” (Atwood, 1996: 82). It was Janine who led her rapists to abuse her, and God allowed it to happen to teach her a lesson. At the end of the process Janine herself is convinced that it was her fault.

A Prayvaganza is an act of verbal obedience. A combined marriage where the adolescent Commander's daughters give their vows of subservience to the Angels, their future husbands. Even a marriage is transformed into a public ritual that gathers all members of society. One of the biggest expressions of love becomes another regime's means to highlight the unequal relationship between men and women where the wife is subjected to her husband's power.

There are two last rituals established by the Republic of Gilead for its own purposes. The Ceremony and the Birth Day are the acts that most degrade the female body, where women are downgraded to mere object to be used by men as they please. The Ceremony is a sexual act taking place once a month during the period of fertility, between the Handmaid and her Commander in order to procreate, preceded by the ritual reading of a passage of the Bible by the Commander. The Ceremony is only a mechanical act completely devoid of any emotion and feeling. Without her knickers and with her red skirt hitched up, the Handmaid lies on the bed between the Wife's open leg, with her head rested against her stomach, while the Wife hold her hands, to signify that they have become one flesh. Offred thus describes the sexual intercourse, highlighting the process of objectification she is undergoing, carefully weighing the words she uses:

Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for (Atwood, 1996: 104-105)

The Ceremony excludes intimacy and any form of love, pleasure and bonding between man and woman that sex is usually supposed to entail. Doubled by the Wife

who is behind her, the Handmaid has a sexual intercourse with the Commander in an imitation of the conjugal act of procreation advocated by the Christian Church. To distance even more the two participants in the sexual encounter, any additional physical contact, such as touching and kissing is prohibited. Actually not only does the Handmaid dissociate herself from her body, but also the Commander is rather passive during the reproductive act. These rigid rules are indicator of Gilead's fear that sex intercourses may enforce intimate bonding between opposite sexes, thus endangering its social and political order.

As a consequence of the Ceremony there is the Birth Day ritual, at least when the Ceremony has been successful, a not so frequent phenomenon. Always doubled by the Wife, the Handmaid gives birth to the child conceived with the Commander. Even though it should be a private event, also the Birth Day attain the status of a public ceremony, an other occasion to gather all the members of society who attend the birth as if it were a public spectacle. And indeed, in the Gileadean era, it is. All the female social categories are present, however always maintaining hierarchical and gender division, whereas the Commander is absent. Before the birth, Wives and Handmaids avoid each other: Wives are all gathered downstairs celebrating the Commander's Wife of the household, while Handmaids wait upstairs with the pregnant Handmaid, supporting her. Only when the Handmaid begins to give birth to the child, also the Wives enter in the bedroom where all the Handmaids are gathered. Just as during the Ceremony, the Wife of the household, held by two wives, imitates the Handmaid, who is held by two helpers too, in the act of giving birth. Allowing the Handmaids to take part in the Birth Day, Gilead subtly reminds them that they failed to fulfill their task of childbearing.

Along with collective ceremonies, public executions and false propaganda, the Colonies function as a means to employ all those women considered useless for Gilead's purposes, such as Handmaids who have wasted their three chances, old and barren women, incorrigible women who are not sent to the Re-educational center since they may be a corruptive influence in society, but they are given a choice: either the Colonies or Jezebel's, but also homosexual men. In these labour camps, prisoners are forced to either burn dead corpses from battles or from city ghettos, or to clean up toxic waste, obviously a mortal job that is supposed to kill them within three years. Moreover, prisoners are not fed much, or given any necessary, such as clothing.

II. Historical Background

2.1. Why the United States?

The Republic of Gilead has been established within the confines of what used to be the United States. More specifically, Offred's narrative is set in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the regime has converted a place of knowledge, Harvard campus, into Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre, where Handmaids are brainwashed and trained to obey and to fulfil their duty as childbearings, and also Gilead's Secret Service headquarters.

The reason why she chose such a setting for her novel instead of Canada, her homeland, is that, “The States are more extreme in everything. Our Genius is for compromise. [...] Canadians do not swing much to the left or the right, they stay safely in the middle” (Ingersoll, 1992: 223). Canada is well known for being a tolerant and open-minded country that does not have a utopian vision; the ascent of America has its own basis on the myth of the American dream that saw the United States as the homeland of freedom and democratic ideals, a place that would welcome indiscriminately immigrants from around the world and would offer opportunities for a new and wealthier life. Actually, if immigrants wanted to be assimilated into American society, they had to conform to American values, ideals and culture abandoning their own cultural identity, otherwise they would be alienated and considered outsiders.

She situates the United States and Canada in terms of dichotomies, placing Gilead theocracy in the United States, whereas Canada represents the safe place to reach, but at the same time it shows itself to be indirectly complicit, since “the Canada of that time did not wish to antagonize its powerful neighbour” (Atwood, 1996: 323), and it gathered and extradited the refugees.

Like in Atwood's survey *Survival*, where she claims that, if the idea symbol of British literature is the island, and US literature is associated with the concept of the frontier, the recurrent theme in Canadian writing is survival, also in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the primary aim of Canada is to survive. In this sense, Offred can be seen as a Canadian heroine: she does not want to struggle against the regime, to rebel, she only cares about her own safety, to survive in a world that has brutally oppressed her.

According to Atwood, America is more prone to dystopia. With *The Handmaid's Tale*, she highlights how a nation based on the utopian principle of liberty and equality

for all, has also become a dystopia for all those individuals discriminated and tortured for being outsiders, not integrated in the mainstream culture, such as Native Americans, also deprived of their territories; African Americans who were brought to America as slaves in the 18th century and continued to be discriminated at least until the end of the 20th century; and women. The United States has always advocated its position as an anti-imperialistic nation, thus denying the imperialistic and discriminating mechanisms at work within its society.

Through *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood shows how American imperialism and nationalism constitute the basis for the foundation of the Republic of Gilead, thus making her narrative plausible: episodes of confinement, alienation and loss of freedom at the expense of those groups of people considered ethnically and culturally inferior had already occurred in America and history could repeat itself. “Within *The Handmaid's Tale* lies the powerful suggestion that progress toward global human rights will never be possible until nations of “freedom” face their own incarcerated dystopian realities” (Dodson, 2010: 196).

The U.S. is an instance of how utopia and dystopia easily coexist: a land of contradictions and dichotomies that mixes concepts up, such as liberty with captivity, or justice with inhumanity. On the one hand, America has always been considered synonymous with Utopia: the land of the American Dream, a set of principles such as democracy, liberty and equality that granted individuals the possibility for prosperity, wealth and success. The main idea was that hard work, determination and dedication guaranteed the achievement of goals and the improvement of standards of living, regardless of the social status, conversely to Great Britain where lineage still counted. This is the reason why it became the favourite destination for many of our ancestors since its discovery.

However, while Puritans coming from Great Britain arrived full of hope, longing to build a new and just nation, to realize their own utopic project, others saw the same utopic project as a nightmare. When Europeans first arrived they propagated the belief that America was an inhabited continent, so that they were free to colonise the land without restrictions. The truth was that they conquered and destroyed the land, brutally removing, enslaving and even exterminating the Natives that already lived there.

To know America means to have a knowledge of the barbarity committed by humankind against other helpless humans, such as the genocide of the American Natives, slavery, urban squalor, the atomic bombs in 1945, and Vietnam, for instance.

2.1.1. A Puritan Heritage

In the prefatory dedications Atwood mentions Mary Webster and Perry Miller, two significant figures in her studies of the 17th century American Puritan theocracy that led her to theorize that the Puritan sentiment was still influencing the U.S. in the present day.

Perry Miller was a professor of Atwood at Harvard. He established American Puritanism as an academic discipline, a fertile ground for literary investigation. He was an important figure in the field of Puritan studies since he was aware that the first Puritans who colonized America,

did not come to North America in search of religious toleration [...] They wanted the freedom to practice their religion, but they were not particularly keen on anyone else practicing his or hers. Among their noteworthy achievements were the banishing of so-called heretics, the hanging of Quakers, and the well-known witchcraft trials” (Atwood, 2005: 96-97),

something very close to what she portrays in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Mary Webster is one of Atwood's Puritan ancestors who lived in the 17th century and inspired Atwood's poem *Half-Hanged Mary*. Mary was accused and tried of witchcraft and then hanged from a tree. When the next day they cut Mary down they discovered that she was still alive. Mary's luck was due to the fact that they had not invented the drop yet, and therefore in the process her neck was not broken. Since they could not execute her a second time for the same crime, she lived for another fourteen years. Thus, Atwood ironically explained why she decided to dedicate *The Handmaid's Tale* to Mary: “I felt that if I was going to stick my neck out by writing this book, I'd better dedicate it to someone with a very tough neck” (Atwood, 2005: 97).

The future society Atwood imagines in her dystopia is inspired by the theocracy established in the 17th century by the Puritan settlers. Her belief is that a society never “strays completely far from its roots” (Atwood, 2005: 97). A dictatorship always takes the power when the country is undergoing a period of social, political and economic crisis, often after a long and exhausting war. Citizens are ready to sacrifice part of their

freedom to a leader for an improvement of their condition. Italy and Germany are an instance of this. The Great War had devastating aftermaths on both countries, especially on Germany that was entirely blamed for the outbreak of the war and therefore was severely punished. Not only had they to deal with economic difficulties, but also with the numerous losses they suffered. Thus, the discontent was growing among the citizens and Hitler and Mussolini had things easy.

Also Atwood's dystopian world is in dire straits at the time of the coup d'état, because of a period of environmental catastrophe. Toxic pollution has led to an increase of the sterility rate and a decrease of the birth rate. The ability to give birth to healthy children has become rare and therefore valued, and the few women still fertile are declared property of the country, and assigned to those who hold the power. Women are confined in the home like in the not so distant past. Alienating women again, after all the battles fought to grant them equality was a challenge for Atwood. She first deprives them of the right to vote, their own properties and jobs, and then she relegates them to the role of housekeepers and childbearing.

Apparently, Atwood seems to criticize Christianity itself. However, what she openly condemns is the misguided interpretation and use of the Holy Scriptures as a justification of regimes' practices, rather than to deny their content and meaning. As she claims, the most powerful totalitarian governments, such as Nazi Germany, imposed tyranny in the name of religion. They gave religious foundations to their regimes to legitimize their ideologies and activities. A tyranny functions because it is based on an unquestionable authority.

In a democratic government where freedom of speech and of thought is the norm, political disagreement is simply political disagreement, other political ideologies are allowed; but political disagreement in a dictatorial regime becomes heresy. And since they represent a threat to the political authority of the regime, heretics must be condemned and executed. Crusades, forcible conversions to Islam, Christian missions in the New World to civilize the barbarous Natives, the Spanish Inquisition or burnings at the stake are just some of the brutal practices operated by humankind.

Also Gilead provides instances of such misappropriation. Old Testament patriarchs were polygamous. Every day, and also once a month before the Ceremony, Offred must listen to the reading of Gilead's cornerstone, the Biblical story about the barren Rachel,

her husband Jacob and her maid Bilhah who bore a child for them, that justifies her role as a Handmaid. Everyday for lunch, she must listen to a man's reading of the Beatitudes from a tape. Among the various blessings, it emerges “Blessed are the silent”, that reminds the Handmaids of their status as alienated individuals and of the use of violence to keep them silent. It is thus evident that Atwood warns against the advent of totalitarianisms, and the way through which they subtly conquer the power.

2.1.2. A Colonial Heritage

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood addresses her concerns about the effects that American colonialism still has on the U.S. Indeed, Gilead “exhibits internal elements of the colonial agenda historically associated with America's numerous policies of domination” (Dodson, 2010: 200). America believed to be entitled to exclude and marginalize all those considered culturally different, because of their unjustified sense of national superiority. Atwood imputes the fault of the promulgation of this idea to american educational institutions that have instilled in their citizens a sense of supremacy. This indoctrination has led to a system based on the dichotomy One opposed to the Other, one race, one culture, one religion one system of thought opposed to the other race, with the One considered superior and just. America is seen as the homeland of civilization and progress opposed to the Others who are savage and primitive and need to be civilized through the conversion to Christianity. What is not American, white and Christian is the Other and therefore an outsider. Gilead functions according to the same principles. All religious and cultural minorities, such as African Americans and Quakers are considered obstacles to the creation of a superior race and a superior religion. Actually, America has developed from the Puritan culture of the first settlers, thus is inevitable that there is a persistence of a Puritan sentiment at the core of American culture.

The denial of truth is at the basis of American history. The myth narrates that the first Puritans came to the New World to establish a puritan democracy based on equality and freedom, however the concept of democracy did not even exist at that time, they only aimed to realise their own utopia: a theocracy based on their own religious ideals, where religion and politics are combined to shape a government. Since Puritan settlers wanted to set up a colony where only the chosen and righteous people of God would live and prosper, one of the main Puritan policies was that any dissenter who did not

agree with them religiously would be persecuted. The result was that many 17th century inhabitants of the New World were dispossessed, eradicated, incarcerated and even executed when necessary. “The puritan missionary spirit ultimately gave way to the military spirit, and the Puritans defined their relationship to the New World in terms of violence and warfare” (Dodson, 2010: 202). The autochthonous inhabitants of America, the so-called Indians, were considered base and savage, unworthy of having any authority on the New World, and so they deserved to lose their properties and their land.

With *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood offers a rereading of American history, showing how colonial dynamics based on the juxtaposition of One and Other and the idea that the One is superior and more worthy, have widely influenced American culture and literature. Just as her ancestors did from the 17th century onwards, the Puritans who have established the Republic of Gilead violently persecute, hang and enslave all the religious opponents. Moreover, in order to cover the truth about the crimes they were committing against American Indians and their lands up, the first European settlers claimed that the New World was a virgin land, where they found no sign of life.

An interesting instance of literature written and used for the purposes of imperialism is the captivity narrative. These narratives include stories about white people pursued and kidnapped by the wicked, base and uncivilized North American indigenous people, and can be considered an example of propaganda, where truth is manipulated. Indians of America are wrongly portrayed as the evil people that needed to be deprived of their possessions and thus indoctrinated and converted to Christianity by the superior and civilized Europeans. For instance, Mary Rowlandson who was an American colonial author, was captured by the Indians during an attack to her village and kept prisoner for three months. This happening inspired her *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* where she describes what she experienced during her days of imprisonment. Clearly, Atwood inverts the basic structure of the captive narrative, by assigning the role of the evil people to the white Puritan men.

Apart from religious and ethnic differences, at the core of the discriminatory policy of Gilead there is the marginalization of women that recalls the Puritan witch trials. The cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner has noted that historically, since colonial time, whereas men are associated with culture, women are symbolically identified with nature, especially because of their procreative role. During the infamous Salem witch trials that took place from the 1692 to 1693, more women than men were tried of witchcraft. Women were seen as libidinous creatures threatening traditional patriarchy,

therefore they had to be silenced. They were hunted and then annihilated. Black women suffered a double discrimination: both sexual and racial. They were the first to be accused of witchcraft (Dodson, 2010: 196-205).

Atwood asserted that *The Handmaid's Tale* is partly inspired by the slave narrative. The figure of the Handmaid is associated to that of the female Afro-American slave that was similarly sexually abused by her master. Again, orality is the means of self-preservation for those women who are dispossessed of the principal tools of literacy, since they cannot write, such as Offred who tries to deliver her tale to future generations through a tape recorder. Gilead can be equated with slavery in the American South. Black women were objectified, they were priced so that they could be sold and bought by the landowners of the South and often they were valued as breeders.

Atwood openly condemns American imperialism that silenced and marginalized foreign ethnicities, noting that it is a tendency that keeps spreading in the United States. Gilead is a plausible reality, since it represents the continuation of the colonial America that earned a living thanks to plantations and slavery and that adopted discriminatory policies. The Gileadean regime is a consequence of Puritanical intolerance: it has continued the mistreatment of the cultural and racial Other. Just as the Natives or the Japanese Americans during World War II who were interned in camps, the Children of Ham (Afro-Americans) are colonized and sent to the labour camps.

Whereas racial victims have been displaced from Gilead to purify society, fertile white women are enslaved and used at the discretion of the patriarchs. As the autobiography of the former slave Harriet Ann Jacobs proves, many African slaves suffered sexual exploitation in the pre-Civil War South. Jacobs published her autobiographical work under the pseudonym Linda Brent, her alter-ego who narrates her story. Both the Handmaids and the Afro-American slaves are impregnated by their masters, but after the birth, being labelled as sinful and immoral subjects, they are dispossessed of their child whose custody is granted to the patriarchs and their wives. They are nothing more than sexual slaves. If a Handmaid is not able to bear a child, she is sent to the Colonies, whereas an African slave's value diminish and she is sold. Despite these similarities there are many differences between the discrimination suffered by a white woman and a black woman, that are also at the basis of the debate between black and white feminists. Black slaves were more oppressed, both physically and psychologically.

The figure of the white woman, idealized and portrayed as pure and innocent and whose sexuality is denied, is in contrast to the idea that the patriarchs had of the licentious black woman as the primitive embodiment of sexuality in a mechanism that devalued black women. They were the Other Women opposed to the Caucasian True Women, embodiment of purity, domesticity and submissiveness.

Even though Offred is a slave in the Gileadean system, deprived of all her properties, her name included, and sexually exploited for reproductive purposes, she is not physically maltreated, rather she is categorized as a valuable resource that must be protected from any type of sexual harassment. Moreover, she is offered a refuge where she is fed, and once a month she is taken to the doctor for a check up. Conversely, slave women did not have any of these privileges, they suffered from gynecological complaints and had problems of malnutrition.

Commander Fred can be related to the patriarchs of the old South. However, while they were violent men who constantly raped and harassed their slaves, the Commander is not a physical threat, he does not have evil intentions, when he invites her to his study for instance, it is only to play scrabble.

Gilead is partly the result of women's failure to bond, independently from class and race. There has never been solidarity between black and white women, probably because of racial divisions. Feminism has done very little to address the double alienation suffered by black women (Dodson, 2010: 205-217).

Offred unwittingly is complicit in her own submission to Patriarchy. Before the coup she was a white and privileged woman, with a family, a job and a bank account who, taking for granted her freedom, displayed indifference towards all the women marginalized due to their ethnic and cultural diversity. She did not partake in the feminist movement, the cause of those women struggling for their rights seemed so distant from her own reality of equality and opportunities. Now that she has been dispossessed of everything and degraded, she gradually becomes aware of the importance of those stories of social struggle and that negligence towards social and political issues and injustices can contribute to the establishment of a totalitarian government that deny freedom to individuals, controlling their lives. As Dodson has rightly observed, "Offred here discloses that her acquiescence to the sexual and racial imperialism of contemporary America was based on a false sense of the freedom that comes from 'ignoring'" (2010: 219). Offred failed to understand the socio-political reality of America, its discriminatory tendencies. She repeatedly admits how she was

indifferent to the predicaments undergone by other women, for instance, how she found documentaries about the enslavement of Third World women in the colonies extremely boring.

Regimes silence the voices of the marginalized minorities so that the voices of those who hold the power are the only ones heard. This is why tales of suppressed individuals within autocratic governments are very important to end oppression and tyrants' abuse of power. Before the advent of the Republic of Gilead, Offred had ignored the stories of suppressed women for long, and now she finally understands that suppressing her own tale would mean to promulgate imperialistic tendencies.

2.2. Atwood's Historical Context

As Atwood has repeatedly pointed out, everything described by the narrator in *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on historical events. The novel shocked, and still shocks its readers for its content, however, it must not be forgotten that there is nothing that humankind did not do in the past, is not doing in the present or would not do in the future. The power of the novel lies in Atwood's detailed exploration and critique of contemporary world. History always repeats itself, and the tragedies occurred in the past seem not preventing humankind from committing those same atrocities.

Atwood's childhood was affected by wartime, and she gradually developed a sense of political injustice as she grew up. and witnessed events such as the Cold War, Vietnam War and 1950s anti-Communist purges. She wanted her novel to be a mirror reflecting reality, thus, in the 1980s she started collecting clippings from newspapers, she investigated history, reading up about European happenings in the last decades, and the rise of fundamentalist theocracies around the world. These clippings became the main sources of her novel. She was especially interested in the history of totalitarian regimes, how they came to power, the forms they took, how they functioned, and the techniques they used to control their citizens.

She saw religious fundamentalisms as a threat to democracy and freedom, and this threat became more concrete when in 1978 she and her family went to Afghanistan where they witnessed the rise of Muslim fundamentalism. As Atwood has claimed, dictatorships establish especially during periods of national crisis, and Afghanistan was devastated by years of civil wars, revolutions and the Soviet-Afghan War that involved also the Soviet Union, sided with the Republic of Afghanistan, in a guerrilla war against

insurgent groups. In the following years, several wars broke out in the Middle East and Muslim leaders based part of their politics on a growing anti-Western sentiment. For instance, in Iran, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini under Mohammad Reza Shah was the leader of the Iranian Revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty supported by the United States, so that he founded an Islamic Republic in Iran. However, the decision of the President Jimmy Carter to allow the deposed Shah to come to the States for cancer treatment led to the Iran hostage crisis. On the 4th November 1979, a group of Iranian students headed by Khomeini, notoriously anti-American, stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and seized 60 American hostages, who were held for 444 days, thus putting an end to American interference in its affairs. As Lisa Jadwin notes, “During this period, the United States itself was effectively 'held hostage' as the world was subjected to the anti-western rhetoric of Iranian leaders” (2010: 27). Their prestige was further damaged when Carter's attempt to rescue the hostages in April 1980 failed. As a consequence, in the next presidential elections Carter was defeated by Ronald Reagan that started a presidency termed the Reagan Revolution: not only did he strengthen American economy, but he also contributed to end the Cold War. In 1981 he solved the hostage crisis, obtaining the release of the hostages. Later, it was revealed that he secured their release by promising to provide weapons to the now anti-U.S. Iranian government.

Simultaneously, Anglophone countries were experiencing conservative revolutions. In Canada, for instance, after years of liberal government, the Progressive Conservative Brian Mulroney became Prime Minister. As explained hitherto, Reagan was elected indirectly, as a consequence of the rising of Islamic theocracies in the Middle East. The United Kingdom saw the rise to power of Margaret Thatcher, the first female Prime Minister, who ruled over the U.K. with a firm hand from 1979 to 1990. Both Thatcher and her ally Reagan, “helped to refashion the governmental landscape in the western world during the latter half of the 20th century by rejuvenating the conservative philosophy that each championed so fervently” (Thornburgh, 2013). They both inherited troubled economies and deindustrializing culture, and both helped their countries to get on their feet again.

1980s United States was becoming more conservative. This climate and certain claims made by religious leaders (not so distant from Gileadean politics) alarmed Atwood. America saw the birth of the Moral Majority, a U.S. evangelical conservative lobby founded by the religious leader and televangelist Jerry Falwell in 1979, who

helped Reagan to win the elections. They wanted that the foundations of Christianity took root in the politics of the nation. Their agenda included outlawing abortion, opposition to homosexuality, pornography and Equal Rights Amendment, a détente between the States and Ussr, the enforcement of a patriarchal vision of family and society. Indeed, Moral Majority was founded as a response to the social and cultural background of the beginning of the 1980s, especially those developments that were seen as a threat to traditional moral values of the country and to the Christian family, that had to be patriarchal. In their view, it comprised the breadwinner father and husband that worked to maintain his family, a wife and mother that had to stay at home and take care of the family and the household, and several children. The civil rights movement, the women's movement and the gay rights movement were clearly threatening this vision of society, because they implied equality between different ethnicities, and the only superior race was the white and Christian one, and between the sexes. The Equal Rights Amendment guaranteed equal rights for both men and women and ended legal distinctions between the sexes. Also marriage between the same sexes was inconceivable, and they feared that the ERA would legalize it and fund abortion. At the same time, Ronald Reagan implemented cuts to the federal budget and women were the most affected category. Jadwin summarises how women lost many of their achievements:

“Though the defense budget emerged untouched, programs that served primarily women, though they comprised less than 10 percent of the federal budget, accounted for fully one-third of the total number of federal budget cuts during the Reagan administration. As the national murder rate declined, reported incidents of domestic violence increased by 160 percent. Nationwide, government support for rape crisis workers, victim advocacy, and battered women's shelters declined. [...] and Medicare support for abortion was eliminated” (2010: 29).

2.3. A Mirror Reflecting Reality

Through a thorough analysis of the dystopian world portrayed by Margaret Atwood,

many of the aspects, practises and happenings described by Offred sound familiar, as if we had already read it somewhere else. Actually, Atwood took inspirations from a file of newspaper clippings, and other sources, she had deliberately collected to write her novel, since she did not want to invent anything, just portraying reality.

Gilead's policy that forces fertile women to bear children for the elite and the abduction of the children they had before the coup, has historical precedents, the Nazi Lebensborn programme is an instance. The decrease of the birth rate in Germany partly due to the increase of abortions, and also the increase of illegitimate children lead Heinrich Himmler to design a program based on the theories of eugenics that aimed both to protect racial purity, namely the superior Aryan race, and to reverse the birthrate decline. Nazi kidnapped thousands of children with blue eyes and blonde hair who looked Aryan, even Polish children, and then they were indoctrinated to become real Germans. Another practice was to mate SS officers, even when they were already married, with German women that had no jewish ancestry, or it was sufficient that they were blue-eyed and blonde-haired women.

Very recently, in Australia and in the United States and Canada, indigenous children were stolen to be adopted by white families that would provide them a Christian education.

In Romania, in 1966, the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu took control of women's fertility, he banned any form of contraception and abortion, and he introduced policies that sustained the increase of the birthrate. To enforce the decree, the regime installed the secret police in hospitals, women were subjected to gynaecological visits once a month and citizens who had not children were taxed. Women had the duty to have babies, and those who had at least five children could receive various advantages, however, few women achieved this objective, they gave birth to no more than two or three children. The population steadily increased, but many other women died or were mutilated during illegal abortions and childbirth mortality rate increased. Many of the families who had the children could not afford to maintain them, and as a result thousands of babies were abandoned.

The establishment of the Republic of Gilead is gradual. Before being excluded from public life and completely marginalized, women have been deprived of their own independence, money and they have been forced to leave their jobs, without warnings: one day soldiers bursted into offices and commanded women to leave. On the 9th of November 1938, Jews encountered a similar faith. Nazi attacked, looted and destroyed

Jewish properties, synagogues, businesses, cemeteries, schools and homes and killed dozens of Jewish people. The Kristallnacht marked the beginning of the nightmare. From that day onwards, local authorities imposed curfews, they were banned from most public spaces, expelled from schools and completely segregated. In twenty-four hours thousands of them were arrested and sent to the concentration camps.

Women in Gilead are forced to wear coloured uniforms which identify their roles in society, and so were Jewish people during the Third Reich. To be distinguished from the Aryan population, they were forced to wear a yellow band around their arm that sported the star of David. Also, just as Jewish people lost their name and they were reduced to numbers, tattooed on their arms, women were named after the commanders who owned them. In both regimes, homosexuals, intellectuals and political opposers are executed or sent to the labour camps. Undoubtedly, the Colonies were inspired by Nazi concentration camps and Soviet Gulags. In Gilead, old and barren women are named “Unwomen”, probably referring to all those ethnic groups considered inferior and described as “Untermenschen” in Nazi Germany.

The discrimination of women is not new in world history. While she was in Afghanistan at the end of the 1970s, Atwood noticed that there were not women in public spaces, and Arabic men did not address her directly, they rather spoke only to her partner. The uniform worn by the Handmaids, with a white wimple framing their face recall both the attire of the Catholic nuns but also the traditional Islamic dress. For instance, in Iran wearing the hijab is compulsory. Forcing women to wear such a religious clothing is not only a matter of customs and traditions, but it is a means that allows authority to control and subdue women.

Women who do not behave morally could be punished with mutilation. The Aunts use also female genital mutilation as a corrective punishment for those women classified as Unwomen. Unfortunately, FGM is not confined to the world portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*, actually, millions of young girls between the ages of 4 and 12 have undergone this operation, or are currently at risk, even in a country such as the UK. Traditionally performed without anaesthetic, it involves the removal of the clitoris and inner-and-outer lips of the vagina. FGM can lead to severe bleeding and pain, and infection, sometimes it is lethal.

Also salvagings and participation do not belong only to *The Handmaid's Tale*, but they are practiced in some parts of the world. In the Philippines are famous extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances of political dissidents. Michael Barrett, an Irish

bomber, was the last man to be publicly hanged only 150 years ago in 1868, in Britain. However, in Iran, Somalia, North Korea and Saudi Arabia public hangings are still legal. A 2004 poll revealed that two third of United States Citizens were in favour of televised executions. And again, in Somalia, on October 27, 2008, the 13-year-old Aisha Ibrahim Duhulow, victim of rape, was accused of adultery, arrested, buried up to her neck and stone to death as a crowd was watching. (Hawkes, 2017).

III. A Postmodern Approach

3.1. What is Postmodernism?

The Handmaid's Tale differs from its predecessors from several points of view. Margaret Atwood's dystopia can be also classified as a postmodern work, due to the employment of certain techniques typical of the postmodern literary production of those years, as it will be demonstrated. But first, in order to understand *The Handmaid's Tale's* connection to it, it is fundamental to understand what Postmodernism is.

Postmodernism is often associated with a style, style of writing, architecture, painting or thinking. The American architect and postmodern thinker Charles Jencks claimed that the beginning of the postmodern era dated back to the 15th July 1972 when the housing scheme designed by Minoru Yamasaki, the Pruitt-Igoe, considered the symbol of modernist architecture, was destroyed by a planned explosion, thus signalling a rift between modern and postmodern (Walmsley, 2006: 405).

Many other critics agreed on the idea that there is no clear dividing line between the two periods, even declaring that postmodernism cannot be defined chronologically. Actually, postmodernism is a fluid and open concept. A unifying definition of Postmodernism does not exist, it is a concept full of contradictions and paradoxes, but there are some dominant trends that allow the construction of a definition. Generally, it displays scepticism towards universal truths that dominated Western culture until that moment, and it questions several assumptions of Enlightenment. Postmodernism is the form of art that reflects Postmodernity. Postmodernity is a cultural condition, the age that witnessed the triumph of Capitalism and the complete transition from the Industrial age to the Information Age.

Many critics see postmodernism as a rejection of and break with Modernism. Modernism was a movement that captured the experience of modernity. The epoch from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century was a period of abrupt social, political and economic changes and transformations, that saw industrialisation, urbanisation and was influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment. Individuals were alienated and fragmented, relegated into anonymity. If modernism offered the possibility of depth and of interpretation, conversely, Postmodernism denied these possibilities, and used irony, parody and pastiche as its primary modes of representation.

The main idea was that there was no transcendental, objective viewpoint. The revolution brought about by the Enlightenment was discarded, neither science could achieve a certain knowledge: there could not be any stable and universal truth. Thus, scepticism, doubt and paranoia became the basis of postmodern thought. Thinkers believed that “agreement is always enforced, that truth is merely a coerced consensus, and everything is relative” (Walmsley, 2006: 408). There must be tolerance for difference, individuals should not force their truth on others, rather, it must be accepted that everyone has his own version of things.

One of the key concepts was that of nostalgia. While Modernist art mourned the loss of the golden age of unity and belonging, the Belle Epoque, Postmodernism saw this loss as something that had to be celebrated, the beginning of a new era.

The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard defined Postmodernism as the end of grand narratives, overall interpretations of the world history. The 20th century is the culmination of the clash of competing grand narratives, such as Communism, Fascism, Colonialism, liberal democracy, Christianity and Islamic fundamentalism. These narratives used to provide credibility to societies and justifications for their actions and practices. By the end of the 20th century also many other thinkers saw that the age of grand narratives was coming to an end. Postmodernism was disillusioned with those metanarratives.

Nothing is universal, thus those individuals who do not agree with a certain system will be violently excluded from it. Lyotard saw those metanarratives as displaying totalitarian impulses, thus he embraced heterogeneity, the possibility for diversity. However, this point of view about grand narratives was incredibly Western-centric, since those philosophers assumed that whatever happened in the West would be the same everywhere else, and grand narratives continued to be active in other parts of the world.

One of the grand ideologies of the 19th and 20th centuries was nationalism and it was responsible for many events. A Nation has a spirit, it brings together many individuals who share a culture, a language and even blood. Nationalism can be a source of freedom, for instance in Africa or India, where many countries achieved independence after World War II. In the 1980s, emerged the idea that the nation was a narration including stories of the past and of traditions. A tradition could be a custom that a people repeats over time and that defines the identity of the individual belonging to it. Tradition comes from the idea of storytelling. Telling a story is not just a way of

entertaining people, but it has a deeper function: both individual and collective storytelling defines identity.

Another fundamental issue Postmodernism deals with, is the focus on marginality. Advocating the possibility for different perspectives, postmodernism also promotes a politics of difference, focusing on those categories of society that have also been marginalized and repressed by “the dominant, central discourses of power ” (Walmsley, 2006: 409). In this sense, Postmodernism has had a certain influence on the fields of feminism and post-colonialism, for instance. Thus, it is inevitable to involve also the concept of microhistory. Microhistory is a field of historical research and investigation founded in Italy in the 1970s that is based on the idea that history should not only narrate about the leading figures of history, such as Napoleon, Carlo Magno or Hitler, but that it can meaningfully talk about single individuals, ordinary people, who lived in a specific period of history and did not have an impact on great happenings, but still they offer a cross section of the society of that period. It is worth mentioning the historical essay *The Cheese and the Worms* written by the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg and published in 1976, a clear instance of microhistory. Just as *The Handmaid's Tale*, which focuses on the predicaments of an ordinary woman living at the margins of history, *The Cheese and the Worms* is about an ordinary man, a miller called Menocchio who, accused of heresy, was tried and burned at the stake by the Inquisition at the end of the 16th century. Menocchio was not a great leader who changed the course of history, nonetheless he has been part of it.

Producing microhistory is a response to the history of great characters, a history that has always silenced marginal characters. Literature is crucially seen as an instrument to recover the voices from the past, and to reread history, to look at it from different perspectives. It is fundamental to make a distinction between the two concepts of history and historiography. If history is what happened in the past, the historical facts, historiography is the writing of history. Therefore we access history through historiography, but unfortunately historiography is the narrative that the main institutions provide us. Literature became a way of challenging historiography, and women history was perhaps the first important realm to be analysed. The multiplication of narratives became a powerful antidote against the monopoly of institutions on historiography, and gave voice to those individuals who had always been silenced and oppressed.

Relevant to *The Handmaid's Tale* is also the metafictional nature of postmodernism. In postmodern fictions indeed, “the making of fiction is itself part of the subject”

(Grace, 2010: 53). Moreover, “Postmodernism's antihierarchical perspective also leads not only to literary experimentation that subverts conventional expectations but also to the mixing and combining of different genres” (Grace, 2010: 53).

3.2. Resistance Through Narrating

Compared to the previous dystopian novel it is inspired by, *The Handmaid's Tale* display a novelty as far as the style and the structure of the narrative are concerned. Atwood chose to present the story through a particular point of view, that of a character who lives at the margins of society, representative of all those groups of people that live “in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. [...] in the gaps between the stories” (Atwood, 1996: 67), whose voice has always been silenced by those in power. Atwood clearly recognizes the importance of these stories, because they add significant chapters to the book of history, giving us a perspective that differs from the stories we are used to listen. Also, Offred's tale move beyond history, it is the expression of her insights, feelings.

Karen Stein rightly compares Offred to a Scheherazade of the future. In *Arabian Nights*, the frame story concerns a Sultan who, after discovering his wife's unfaithfulness, decides that all women are the same and starts marrying young virgins only to execute them immediately after, until he meets Scheherazade. Every night the young woman starts telling him a story arousing his curiosity so that he himself asks her to tell him more of the stories. Thus, she avoids execution and saves herself. Just as in *Arabian Nights*, also in *The Handmaid's Tale* the act of narration is a means of resistance: Offred tells her story to saves her life. However, while in *Arabian Nights* Scheherazade is asked to tell stories by the Sultan who threatens her life, Offred narrates her story in a world where Handmaids are locked into silence. Thus, the narration itself becomes a subversive and criminal act, and Offred risks her life telling her story. Despite the risk, this is the only way the narrator has to create a self through language, and reading her tale readers are complicit in her subversive act of resistance, because they recognize her existence and validate her own subjectivity. Also Dominick Grace points out that “Offred frequently draws attention to the fact that she is constructing narratives about herself” (2010, 53): “I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech” (Atwood, 1996: 76).

Together with the act of narrating, Offred also uses irony as a powerful means for

mental survival, even when describing an official ritual such as the Ceremony: “There's something hilarious about this” (Atwood, 1996: 106). When she is invited by the Commander in his study to play a game of Scrabble, Offred: “I hold myself absolutely rigid. I keep my face unmoving. So that's what's in the forbidden room! Scrabble! I want to laugh, shriek with laughter, fall off my chair” (Atwood, 1996: 148). During a conversation with the Commander about Gilead's policy on prostitutes, Offred expresses her disgust: “So now that we don't have different clothes', I say, 'you merely have different women.' This is irony, but he doesn't acknowledge it” (Atwood, 1996: 249).

Joseph Andriano points out that the game of Scrabble “becomes a trope for the whole text” (2010, 276). To gain advantage, a player must counteract his adversary with words. Scrabble is a game of text and counter-text. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's tale is the counter-text that crosses Gilead's text. Through the brainwashing at the Red Center, Aunt Lydia's voice has become Offred's conscience, but Offred, in order to resist Gilead's indoctrination, cleverly conjures and undercuts it with irony. Aunt Lydia says: “Think of yourselves as pearls”, Offred comments: “I think about pearls. Pearls are congealed oyster spit” (Atwood, 1996: 124). At night, while reciting the prayer she has been taught, she says to God “I don't believe for an instant that what's going on out there is what You meant” (Atwood, 1996: 204). Conjuring Moira's voice, the hymn “There is a Balm in Gilead” becomes “There is a Bomb in Gilead” (Atwood, 1996: 230). During a Prayvaganza Offred remembers the subversive graffiti scratched on the wall “*Aunt Lydia sucks*. It was like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion” (Atwood, 1996: 234).

Since heroic physical resistance is useless and too risky, Offred chooses literacy as a means of insubordination. Narrating her predicament becomes her own act of resistance. As Mohr argues, through her female voice and presence, Offred “disrespect, contest, and decenter the official, public, patriarchal discourse with the secret subtext of her own, private, and individual story and the various stories she relates” (2005: 259).

Through discourse, the individual has access to power and status. “To speak, to write, is to assert one's personhood, inscribe one's subjectivity” (Stein, 2012: 262). As Atwood's narrative proves, through the silencing of Handmaids and the prohibition on writing and reading imposed on them, the regime suppresses their subjectivity. The uniforms they are all forced to wear and the new names assigned to them, makes them invisible, lacking of individuality and thus interchangeable, being only a possession of

the Commander they serve. Gilead has succeeded in its process of objectification of women. Offred feels like a depersonalized it, she says: “My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech” (Atwood, 1996: 76). Starting from these premises, Offred's tale becomes even more significant. Narrating, Offred constitutes herself as a subject thus becoming visible. She creates a Self. Her storytelling implies a need to communicate, therefore she imagines the existence of a listener, she creates an Other, emphasizing the “you”, that could be anyone:

Dear *you*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier [...] I will say *you, you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one. You can mean thousands. I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you. I'll pretend you can hear me (Atwood, 1996: 49-50).

And again, “I want you to hear it (my story), as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape” (Atwood, 1996: 279).

Offred invokes an alter-ego, an addressee, because only if there will be a listener/reader that will find and know her story, she will be remembered and “raised above anonymity as an individual” (Mohr, 2005: 261). On the extra-textual level, the reader can be anyone who comes into possession of the narrative and reads it, whereas on the intra-textual level, these readers could be Moira, Luke, her daughter or anyone belonging to the narrative.

Through her tale, Offred gives voice to a silenced discourse thus defying the strict rules imposed by the Gileadean regime. Indeed, Offred gives voice to words, desires and thoughts that are not allowed, such as the desire of being touched and to touch, for relationship with other human beings or with nature and elements, the desire to receive love, or of being recognized as a human being with her own identity and name, and the will to re-enact the past in the present. Indeed, Offred evokes the past several times throughout her narrative. Even though painful, since they represent a time that will never return, these memories are necessary for her survival. Her name, for instance, as every other thing belonging to the past, is now forbidden, but she keeps guarding it jealously as it allows her “to maintain her existence” (Staels, 95: 4). She is the narrative

subject of her tale, not an object anymore.

She feels the desire to connect with her past, especially through smells of object and nature. Not only smells bring her mind back to the past, but also places. Murphy involves Ferdinand de Saussure's study of semiotics and the definition of signifier and signified. On the one hand, the signifier is the concrete aspect of linguistic signs, the word, the sound image, whereas the signified is the concept, the meaning, the thing indicated by the signifier, and it is less fixed. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the most evident instance is Harvard University, a signifier that has signified different and conflicting concepts:

Founded by Puritans as a college for missionaries in 1636, recast as a mecca for Enlightenment thought by the mid-nineteenth century, evolving into a schizophrenic incubator for both Marxism and the mandates of nobleness oblige in the twentieth century, and morphing into a laboratory for technological innovation and new atheism by the twenty-first century (Murphy, 2013: 238),

now, in the Gileadean era it is the headquarters of the dictatorial system, and while walking along the Wall, Offred thinks about the past: “I can remember where the buildings are, inside the Wall; we used to be able to walk freely there, when it was a university” (Atwood, 1996: 175). Also Jezebel's, the building now used as the state-sanctioned brothel evokes memories from the past, indeed, once it was the hotel where Offred and her husband Luke used to meet and spend happy moments. Now she is back to stay with the Commander.

Thus, Offred connects the abstract past and the concrete present, sensations of the past and present events.

3.3. Context Is All

Usually, in a democratic society, there is nothing subversive in the act of narrating a story. Freedom of speech and of thought are inalienable rights. If considered isolated, Offred's tale is not a spectacular event, but in this context, it is precisely through narration that the protagonist opposes the dictatorial system.

Offred's soon learns that "Context is all" (Atwood, 1996: 154) after the first time she plays Scrabble with the Commander. Just as the act of narrating, the meaning of the game of Scrabble changes according to the context it is played in. In the past, before the advent of Gilead, Scrabble was "the game of old women, old men, in the summers or in retirement villas, to be played when there was nothing good on television. Or of adolescents, once, long long ago" (Atwood, 1996: 148). Now, in Gilead, "it's forbidden [...]. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable. Now he's compromised himself. It's as if he's offered me drugs" (Atwood, 1996: 149). The game of Scrabble is eroticized, it is like "kinky sex" (Andriano, 2010: 280).

At the same time, the Commander has compromised himself. Also high-ranking personalities may be punished if they transgress rules. Handmaids cannot be alone with Commanders, and they cannot read or write, thus when Fred invites her to play Scrabble with him in his study he breaks two rules: not only will he be alone with his Handmaid, but to play the game, Offred has to read and write. Scrabble brings a breath of fresh air in Offred's life, and breaks the monotony of her existence. Labelled as a mere womb, a nonperson, now Offred has the illusion to regain possession of her lost individuality. Scrabble places Offred and the Commander on equal footing. Over the Scrabble board occurs a "free interplay and interchange of ideas between equals" (Andriano, 2010: 281). The words she makes on the board shows her ability as a player, better than she thinks, even though it is not so simple playing with a language now fallen into disuse: "My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I'd once known but had nearly forgotten" (Atwood, 1996: 164).

Actually, this is only an illusory equality since it is always the Commander who holds the power. She wins the first game and she thinks she has let the Commander win the second game. However, the next night, while they are playing two more games, she realizes that it was the Commander who let her win the first time.

During one of their meetings, willing to know the meaning of the Latin graffito carved on the wall of her room "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" (Atwood, 1996: 62), she asks the Commander an explanation. Not only does Offred learn that she is not the first Handmaid to spend time alone with the Commander in his study, but she also learns the faith of her predecessor. Also the Handmaid assigned to Fred before her arrival played forbidden Scrabble games with him, and she surely learnt the Latin she then used to write her message, from the Commander himself. Probably she felt the

same delight Offred feels while secretly reading and writing again, until she understood that such feeling of freedom was only an illusion. The Commander is still the one who holds the power. Probably, the Commander really feels the need for intimacy with another human being, but actually, the main reason why he decides to offer Offred such amusement is to “make her life bearable to her because that would validate the way of the Gileadites” (Andriano, 1996: 283). However, now Offred understands that she has “something on him now [...] the possibility of (her) own death” (Atwood, 1996: 198). Handmaids are an indispensable resource for society, if they commit suicide, Gilead is doomed to collapse.

3.4. A Plurality of Perspectives

In the Gileadean society, while men are considered as the Self, women are classified as the Other and thus marginalized. Thus, a woman must either submit to patriarchy, being a mere object at men's disposal or to annihilate herself. As Mohr argues, “the dividing line between self and the other moves inward, causing a psychological split” (2005: 254). Janine is an instance of the psychological fragmentation and consequent schizophrenia that results from this mechanism of opposition. Janine/Ofwarren embodies the conventional female victim figure. She is a victim in both her lives. Before the coup, Janine was a victim of a gang rape, then she becomes a victim of the regime as a Handmaid. During the testifying, pressed by Aunt Helena, she declares herself guilty of a crime she did not commit, she starts to negate her past and herself thus splitting her consciousness. As a consequence, unable to maintain a contact with her own identity, she descends into madness. Later, when assigned to Commander Warren she gives birth to an unbaby. Symbolically, this baby is Janine herself, the embodiment of her damaged self.

While Janine is not able to stand the process of indoctrination through which Gileadean ideology is forced upon the individuals' unconscious, thus suffering from self-division, Offred, both through the process of narrating and the adoption of the perspectives of different alter egos, gains psychological balance. Her act to create another voice within her narrative is her means of rebellion to challenge the regime. Contrasting with the system of polarization imposed by Gilead, Offred's narrative emerges as the element of transgression and multiplicity. Indeed, not only does Offred offer several versions of facts, but her voice is doubled by several alter egos, such as

Moira, her mother, Ofglen and Serena Joy. In order to survive and to prevent the fragmentation of her self, Offred tries to enter different reconstructed perspectives. She creates a plurality of voices: not only of other characters, but also of the past and of the present.

Interestingly, Offred's narration itself is double-voiced. She narrates her story through two distinct voices: indeed, Offred is both a passive and suffering victim of the regime who mourns the loss of her husband Luke and her daughter and remembers her lost past identity and life, and at the same time she becomes a defiant survivor who refuses to conform and uses sarcasm and irony to challenge the ideology imposed by the system. The former voice is naive, marginally informed, almost ignorant and miserable, so much so that she declares: "I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject" (Atwood, 1996: 298). At the end of her narration she even feels sorry for the Commander, as the Eyes are taking her away from his house. The other voice is sophisticated, ironic and poetic, it quotes works of classic literature such as Marlowe and Shakespeare: "Though this is time, nor am I out of it", and again, she rephrases Shakespeare's *King Lear* "Context is all; or is it ripeness? One or the other"(Atwood, 1996: 202). Both voices can be heard at the beginning of chapter 2. While describing her bedroom, Offred notes that on the ceiling there is a piece of plaster and she displays a certain perceptiveness when she infers "There must have been a chandelier, once. They've removed anything you could tie a rope to" (Atwood: 1996: 17). This voice understands how the regime functions. Immediately after, in the following paragraph, the more innocent voice is observing the furnishings making futile considerations: "Does each of us have the same print, the same chair, the same white curtains, I wonder? Government issue?" (Atwood, 1996: 17).

Throughout her narrative, "Offred frequently slips in and out of her voices of the poet and of an Everywoman in the very same paragraph" (Mohr, 2005: 263). Thus, the narrative becomes dialogic, there is a dialogue between the two voices of the narrator that indicates Offred's inner fragmentation. Multiple perspectives help Offred to be free from binary thought, but also to distance herself from the present in which she lives. Telling her own story and giving voice to other stories, Offred can create a different reality, thus counteracting the reality imposed by the regime.

Chinmoy Banerjee notes that perhaps this inner dialogue could be seen "as the double of another dialogue: that between Atwood and the critics who have charged her

with not providing positive role models, and for being pessimistic” (2010: 166). Atwood offers also a probable romantic happy ending in response to the charge of pessimism: Offred is rescued by her lover, the Chauffeur Nick finding happiness. This is an ending that could be interpreted also as the triumph of female sexuality over its denial.

3.5. Offred's Meditation on Language

Banerjee provides instances of how both Offred's voices often meditate on the meaning of words. The educated first voice reflects on “the difference between *lie* and *lay*. Lay is always passive” (Atwood, 1996: 47), she gives a name to her feelings: “This is what I feel like: this sound of glass. I feel like the word *shatter*” (Atwood, 1996: 113) and analyses the word *chair*:

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others (Atwood, 1996: 120).

In this case Offred clearly challenges the limited system of communication imposed by Gilead, by examining words and unearthing their multiple meaning. While the regime “adheres to monolithic meaning, Offred [...] reconnects words and their meanings in new ways” (Mohr, 2005: 265).

The other voice remembers words and phrases from the time before Gilead such for instance: “The pregnant woman's belly is like a huge fruit. *Humungous*, word of my childhood” (Atwood, 1996: 36-37), and “*I know what you mean*, we'd say. Or, a quaint expression you sometimes hear, still, from older people: *I hear where you're coming from*” (Atwood, 1996: 21).

Offred also often remembers old words that are officially banned and their meanings rendered heretical by Gilead. For instance, when Offred remembers the time when she had a job, and how it is strange to think about the word *job*, activity now denied to women: “It's strange, now, to think about having a job. *Job*. It's a funny word. It's a job for a man. Do a jobbie, they'd say to children, when they were being toilet-trained. Or of

dogs: he did a job on the carpet” (Atwood, 1996: 182); or “And networks. Networking, one of my mother's old phrases, musty slang of yesteryear. Even in her sixties she still did something she called that” (Atwood, 1996: 212).

Through her playing with and meditation on words, Offred openly refuses to flatten out language as Gilead imposes. “It also sensitises readers to the value of words, warning us to avoid the linguistic traps that political rhetoric specialises in” (Howells, 2003: 85).

Significantly, Offred also ironically employs similes and metaphors to subvert Gileadean language, for instance when she's staring at the men hanging on the wall with bags over their heads, she compares them to “dolls on which faces have not yet been painted”, to “scarecrows”, and also: “The heads are zeros. [...] The heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out” (Atwood, 1996: 42). Or the women hanged with sacks over their heads are compared to “chickens strung up by the necks in a meatshop window; like birds with their wings clipped, like flightless birds, wrecked angels” (Atwood, 1996: 289). And again, the irises in Serena Joy's garden are “like blown glass, like pastel water momentarily frozen in a splash, light blue, light mauve” (Atwood, 1996: 161).

Despite her awareness of the phallogocentric construction of language and her refusal to conform, Offred continues to be dependent on the same language she criticizes. She does not consider the idea of creating new words and a new language, but she uses the oppressor's language fitting it to her needs. As Mohr points out, in Atwood's own view “Mental liberation or decolonization requires then [...] not the creation of a new language, but a subversive reflection on language” (2005: 266).

3.6. Unreliability of the Narrator

As we eventually discover with the “Historical Notes”, Offred has not written her tale during the time the events occur, but she narrates her story some time after the events in her story. As a consequence her reliability is questioned since she is distant from the tale she tells. The first thing to notice is that, conversely to its predecessors, like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*, the events in *The Handmaid's Tale* are not narrated following a chronological order. The narrative, in the present-tense, is full of flashbacks and meditations. The story is divided into fifteen sections and seven of them, entitled

Night, are dedicated to Offred's reflections and time travels: "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet" (Atwood, 1996: 47). During the night, when she is alone in her room she can mentally escape from the present and experience again moments from her past: both the time at the Red Center and the happy time before the revolution: "the night is my time out. Where should I go? Somewhere good. Moira, sitting on the edge of my bed" (Atwood, 1996: 47). These flashbacks are important also for the readers since they give us two different perspectives of the American society: the America before the coup and the Gileadean America, thus allowing a comparison.

As Offred frequently points out repeating the phrase "I can't remember", her memory may be not exact, we cannot be sure that each events occurred as she tells it. She recreates the facts, what she tells us is a reconstruction, as Offred repeatedly emphasizes:

All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head [...]
It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances (Atwood, 1996: 144).

Offred juxtaposes three different versions of her first encounter with Nick, pointing to the difficulties of reconstructing one's own experience through memories from the past. The reader never knows which version is the closest to the truth since neither Offred does: "I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened. [...] It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is reconstruction" (Atwood, 1996: 273-275). There are not other historical evidences that can help readers to determine which version is the true one. It's impossible to distinguish and label truth and untruth, "The polarization of 'true' and 'false', fact and fiction, is fictionally dismantled" (Mohr, 2005: 264).

Also, the perspective we have of the events occurring in Gilead is a limited perspective. We do not have an omniscient knowledge, we look at Gilead through her eyes. For instance, she does not know her husband's faith, thus, she narrates three different versions of what could have happened to him that are equally real for her: "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" (Atwood, 1996: 116).

3.7. The Historical Notes

The last section of the book, the “Historical Notes”, is not part of Offred's narrative but is very important since it places her tale into historical perspective. It is a partial transcript of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies that takes place on June 25, 2195.

The first thing that can be inferred from the very beginning, is that the Republic of Gilead has failed and has been destroyed, thus becoming subject of academic debate. In this sense, the name of the place where the conference takes place is significant: the University of Denay, Nunavit. This name conceals a double meaning. On the one hand, the two names Denay and Nunavit allude to the native Eskimos and Indians, victims of colonization who prefer to be called Inuit and Dene respectively. Nunavit is named after Nunavut, a territory in the North of Canada between Alaska and Greenland, officially claimed by the Inuits, encompassing all their traditional lands. Denay and Nunavit may be also read as a pun, recalling the phrase “deny none of it”, that can be applied to the victimization of both American natives and of the citizens of Gilead. Also, as far as the issue of ethnicity is concerned, also the choice of the names of the academics is significant. Professor Maryann Crescent Moon not only has a Native American name, but she is also a woman working in an academic environment. She also mentions Professor Johnny Running Dog, Professor Gopal Chatterjee, Professor Sieglinda Van Buren and she introduces Professor James Darcy Pieixoto. This is clearly a heterogeneous group of scholars, consisting of another Native American, an Indian and two other people of “hybridized ethnicity” (Bloom, 2004: 70). From the context of this flash-forward that shows us a post-Gileadean society in which ethnic diversity has become a reality, we learn that the racist policies which aimed to preserve the Christian Caucasian race failed to work. Also, Professor Crescent Moon announcements of planned activities such as a fishing expedition, a Nature Walk and Outdoor Period-Costume Sing-Song hints at the fact that environmental health has improved.

At the Symposium, Professor Pieixoto clarifies that the written text we have just read is not Offred's own production, but it was himself who unearthed Offred's audiotope in Bangor, Maine, once the Underground Femaleroad, and transcribed it. We are in front of a double reconstruction. First of all, Offred emphasizes the difficulties of remembering her predicaments while at Fred's household and tries to reconstruct the events as well as she can. When found, the thirty tapes were neither arranged in a

particular order, nor were they numbered. Thus, it was Professor Wade and Professor Pieixoto's task "to arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go [...] all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate" (Atwood, 1996: 314). The reliability of Offred's reconstruction is further questioned, since her narrative already involved the loss of the original story. Also, "The relationship of narration to interpretation is problematized here" (Stein, 2010: 267), since Pieixoto transcribes Offred's recordings reinterpreting them through his own perspective. This brings us back to Offred's concern about a possible "you", an imaginary listener she is talking to. The existence of a reader/listener is fundamental for the survival of the text, however the risk is that other readings could change the meaning meant by the author and create a new tale.

This final chapter posits interesting questions concerning the process of historical reconstruction and of interpretation of sources. From the very beginning of his discourse, Pieixoto applies the concept "Context is all" to the establishment of a dictatorship such as Gilead. He partly justifies its politics and activities, arguing that it was the current context of diseases and environmental carelessness that led to such drastic measures, and thus, he invites his listeners to not pass moral judgment on the regime: "such judgements are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise [...] Our job is not to censure but to understand" (Atwood, 1996: 314-315).

After the discovery of the tapes, Wade and Pieixoto's first project was to verify whether the narrator really existed and if so, to identify her. Since Offred herself has not provided any detail that may be of help and there are no other useful documents, the endeavour proves to be impossible. For Offred her real name is a precious treasure that she must shield and keep secret, and indeed, she never reveals it. Not very much is known about Offred, Pieixoto just quips: "Our author, then was one of many [...] 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" (Atwood, 1996: 318). Once again, a woman is subjected to male authority, Pieixoto clearly belittles Offred. As Stein points out, "In Gilead and in the hands of the scholar [...], she is reduced to her utility value (Stein, 2010: 267). In Gilead she was useful because of her viable ovaries, now the Professor is interested in her tale only as a source of information to know more about Gileadean history, and especially about the male elite. However, due to the lack of significant and reliable information, Pieixoto fails to discover who Offred was and what

happened to her after the events described in the tapes. Apart from never revealing her name, Pieixoto hypothesizes that the other names she provides, namely Luke, Moira, Nick and Janine, are pseudonyms she uses to protect the people she is referring to. This would suggest that when Offred recorded her tale she was still within the Gileadean territory.

Pieixoto and Wade's primary aim is to reconstruct historical facts. They are more interested in Offred as a member of the society with a specific role, knowledge that is useful for the understanding of the social dynamics in Gilead, rather than as an individual speaking from the periphery of society. Being in search of objective truth, they fail to recognize the function that the act of narrating has: a means through which Offred can give voice to her feelings and emotions and make her own reality more bearable. Since Offred's tale turns out to be useless for the Professors' purpose, they centred their hopes on the Commander. However, also the identification of the Commander is a problem. The two most plausible possibilities are either Frederick R. Waterford or B. Frederick Judd, but neither of them was married to a Serena Joy, and they hypothesize that Offred has used a pseudonym again. Pieixoto reminds his listeners that many of the facts explained hitherto are only speculations, and that he had wished to find any type of document belonging to Commander Waterford: "What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has designed to vouchsafe us" (Atwood, 1996: 322-323). Not only does Pieixoto denigrate Offred herself and her narrative, but he also complains about Offred's uselessness as a historical witness, blaming her for the many gaps that still remain: "Some of them could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy" (Atwood, 1996: 322). Clearly, Atwood demonstrates how "male narratives are still, in spite of all progress toward gender equality, valued over female narratives" (Bloom, 2004: 75). Pieixoto is not interested in knowing more about Offred's identity, he does not consider her a reliable narrator, rather, his real interest is Fred.

Offred is muted once again. Her attempt to be recognized as an individual, to construct her self through her narrative fails. Pieixoto does exactly what she had already predicted: "From the point of view of future history, this kind, we'll be invisible" (Atwood, 1996: 240). He discredits Offred's tale since it lacks important details relevant

to historical investigation, not understanding what she really tried to do: “to witness to the unspeakable horror” (Staels, 1995: 170), speaking on behalf of all the oppressed victims of the regime. He abuses the narrator just as Gilead did, marginalizing again her and taking control over her story, failing to see the tale as an attempt at survival.

Professor Pieixoto can be easily associated with Gilead. As Hilde Staels has pointed out, his desire to find “univocal, transparent meaning ironically mirrors the authoritarian word of Gilead [...] the scientist similarly exclude polyvalence and ambiguity in favour of essential meaning” (1995: 171).

Actually, Offred seems to be well aware of the fact that history repeats itself. Indeed, her narration may be seen also as a warning against the repetition of certain behaviours. As professor Pieixoto demonstrates through his academic speech, values and ideals preached by the regime still permeates the post-Gileadean society. Gilead has ended, however darkness has survived anyway. Once again, we are in front of a male intellectual who refuses to acknowledge the importance of a woman's word in favour of male word.

Through the addition of the Historical Notes as a frame for Offred's narrative, Atwood offers an interesting perspective on historiography, showing how history is constructed and produced. Presenting the tale as a historical document, this “device shows that there is always a conflict between biography, autobiography and the writing of history, between the 'real' and the 'fictive’” (Rao, 1993: 128). The academic transcript further emphasizes Offred's testimony's nature as a double reconstruction. Here, Atwood clearly investigates the dynamics of historical reconstruction, how knowledge is acquired and retold, showing also the difficulties of verifying the veracity and reliability of the sources. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the scholars are trying to reconstruct history through the study of a reconstruction of truth, where the narrator openly chooses what to say and how to say it, also providing three different versions for the description of certain events, thus making the task of historians even more arduous. However, documents are the only access to the past, whose influence on the present is the only trace it has left. Past can never be separated from its own representation. (Rao, 1993: 129).

Finally, describing the dynamics of historiography, Atwood is aware that the representation of history is not real history. She seems to imply that we must pay attention about who writes history, because each scholar interprets history differently, presenting us the events from their perspective which is often influenced by their own

prejudices and ideologies.

3.8. One Narrative Many Genres: a Gothic Dystopia

Since postmodernism challenges the notion of hierarchy and absolute value system, one of its main features became the combination of different genres in a single literary work. Margaret Atwood's interest in gothic literature results also in her work *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the dystopian world is often described following the dictates of gothic fiction.

The genre of the gothic fiction began in Britain in 1764 with the publication of the renowned *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, which established many of the typical conventions of the gothic, thus inspiring many other authors. The story is framed as a 15th-century manuscript by Onuphrio Muralto. From here, the manuscript became a standard gothic convention. One of the similarities with Atwood's work is immediately evident: just as in *The Castle of Otranto* there is a found manuscript, also in *The Handmaid's Tale* there is a similar trope, the only difference being that Offred's is a recording. There are some other tropes of gothic fiction that can be easily recognized also in Offred's narrative.

The first and most evident topos is the victimised and helpless woman. In Gilead women are divided into categories according to their function, they are color-coded, objectified, abused, and even legally raped. Indeed, sex, completely devoid of the feeling of love, has become the norm: a grotesque ceremony that involves also the participation of the Wives. Handmaids live in a male-dominated, gothic world where they are forcibly assigned to the Commanders who control them by entrapping them in their own households which recall the typical gothic setting: the castle, the most recurrent topos in the gothic genre. Gloomy and full of corridors, it symbolizes the incarceration suffered by the female victim. Offred describes the Commander's house as if it were a gothic castle:

I go out into the polished hallway, which has a runner down the centre, dusty pink. Like a path through the forest, like a carpet for royalty, it shows me the way. The carpet bends and goes down the front staircase

and I go with it, one hand on the banister, once a tree, turned in another century, rubbed to a warm gloss. Late Victorian, the house is, a family house, built for a large rich family. There's a grandfather clock in the hallway, which doles out time, and then the door to the motherly front sitting room (Atwood, 1996: 18).

and again, the description of the hall with paintings of ancestors:

two paintings, both of women, one on either side of the fireplace. Both wear dark dresses, like the ones in the old church, though of a later date. [...] there they hang, their backs and mouths stiff, their breasts constricted, their faces pinched, their caps starched, their skin greyish-white, guarding the room with their narrowed eyes. Between them, over the mantel, there's an oval mirror, flanked by two pairs of silver candlesticks, with a white china Cupid centred between them, its arm around the neck of a lamb (Atwood, 1996: 89-90).

Usually, the castle is haunted by a ghost. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* there is not a real ghost, however, immediately after the discovery of the graffito “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” carved on the wall by the previous Handmaid that lived there, Offred feels as if the ghost of her predecessor is still there with her. Surely, before committing suicide, the other Offred left the message hoping that it would help the next Offred to resist. This recalls Daphne du Maurier's gothic novel *Rebecca*. Also here, the narrator feels the ghastly presence of her husband's dead previous wife which is not a real ghost.

In the gothic household and also in society, the male elite, namely the Commanders, is in control. In the narrator's story, Fred can be compared to the typical gothic hero villain, who exercises his aristocratic rights and power over his subjects. In Gilead this is officially and legally true, however, as Offred learns during her staying at his house, the Commander is trapped within the Gileadean system as Offred is. Even though it was him, together with the other Commanders, who established such a government, and who should be the enforcer of the regime, Fred often transgresses the law. First, when he invites his Handmaid to play Scrabble with him in his study, and then when he brings

her to Jezebel's. Despite all this, Offred sees him as a threatening man, "his power makes him a man to be feared" (Tennant, 1991: 113). After all, Offred has no other choices, she is forced to fulfil her function. What Fred offers her are only glimpses of illusory freedom.

Finally, it can be easily noticed also the trope of doubleness. Offred has more than one double. The first and more obvious is the previous Offred, who hanged herself and left the message on the wall for her. Also, Offred sees herself doubled by Ofglen, for instance when they are going out for their shopping: "Doubled, I walk the street" (Atwood, 1996: 33). The first time they communicate they are looking at each other's reflection on a shop window. The narrative provides also some instances of doubling through mirrors. In a mirror of the hall she catches a glimpse of herself:

There remains a mirror, on the hall wall. If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it [...] and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood (Atwood, 1996: 19).

And again: "Down past the fisheye on the hall wall, I can see my white shape, of tended body, hair down my back like a mane, my eyes gleaming" (Atwood, 1996: 108).

Interestingly, as Banerjee has pointed out, the employment of the gothic trope of suspense is a device Atwood purposely uses to parody the gothic genre itself. The Ceremony "typifies the Gothic structure of the narrative", it is the dreadful moment that has repeatedly been hinted at, leading us "to expect it to be a moment of horror and mystery" (Banerjee, 2010: 164). The episode is preceded by suspense: Offred first enters in the room, then Nick and the Marthas and Serena Joy. When all gathered, they wait for the most important participant: the Commander. Then he enters and the Ceremony begins. However, such a long-awaited moment, is not so dreadful, rather, it turns out to be boring. Similarly, the Commander's mysterious invitation to his study turns out to be an invitation to play Scrabble. *The Handmaid's Tale* has the power of suspense typical of gothic fiction, but it is not gothic in itself: "it is a parody of the Gothic" (Banerjee, 2010: 165).

IV. A Feminist Reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*

4.1. The Feminist Movement: a Brief Overview

Feminism is one of the most important social and political movements of the 20th century. The emergence of this “social force”, as Maggie Humm defines it, is due to women's awareness of the discrimination they have always undergone in every sector of society, since men are more valued than women. Thus, on the basis of the principle of gender equality, the main aim of feminists became the achievement of political, social and economic equality for women. They would investigate the dynamics of women's subordination to find a way to end it and transform society. Excluded from public life, once women were confined to the domestic sphere: they were denied the possibility to study, to work and to own property, their task was to take care of the family and the household.

From the very beginning, feminism emerged by means of direct action and radical campaigns: it was activism “which have shaped the political themes of contemporary feminism, not elected politicians” (Humm, 1992: 1). Of course, feminism is an heterogeneous movement, since it is defined by the social, political, economic and cultural context of the society in which it develops. For instance, western feminism cannot be applied to the Third World, where priorities and national policies differ completely. Also, within the movement there are different positions on and theoretical approaches to women's issues, so that feminists speak about the existence of several feminisms, such as, for instance, Liberal Feminism, which believes that to achieve women's equality, certain obstacles that have denied them the same rights as men must be removed; Feminist critical theory, inspired by Gramscian Marxism; or Postcolonial Feminism, that criticizes Western feminists and the way they have constructed knowledge about Third World women (Tickner, 2011: 266).

The spirit of feminism was already alive during the French Revolution, with 1791 Olympe de Gouges' manifesto *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the [Female] Citizen* that asserted women equality to men. In 1792, another important figure, the British Mary Wollstonecraft wrote one of the first political arguments advocating women's rights: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Notwithstanding this, the term “Feminism” was coined in the 19th century to name the newborn movement for the

emancipation of women. Officially, it has been divided in three different waves, that correspond to three different historical periods.

The first organised feminists' battles were carried out by the suffragettes, who fought to grant women the right to vote. In this first phase, feminism focused principally on political claims, but actually, they also began to ask for equality in the field of family law. In Great Britain many organizations in favour of women's suffrage were established: both the Parliament UK and the British Library claim that there were about seventeen organizations that together formed the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (Myers, 2013). In the United States Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony founded the National Woman Suffrage Association whereas Lucy Stone created the American Woman's Suffrage Association. The Suffragist movement began to have its hard-earned victories: Finland was the first country in Europe where women could vote in 1906. In 1918, after the end of the World War I, the Electoral Reform Bill extended the right of vote to women in Great Britain, however only to property owners or property owners'wives aged thirty. It was only in the 1928 that the age limitation became 21 as for men. In the United States, women gained the vote in 1920, while French and Italian female citizens had to wait until the end of the World War II.

Despite the improvement of their condition, women around the world always had to fight to protect their achievements: their newly acquired rights continued to be threatened by those who opposed women's rights. By 1984, in Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini excluded women from education, forced them to resign from their jobs to go back to their households with their burqas. In Afghanistan, to see a woman read or write was unthinkable. At the same time, in the United States, the majority of women had low-paid occupations, and they lost ground in the better-paid professions. The number of women working in politics declined; one-third of the of federal budget cuts came from programs that helped women; the amount a man paid in child support fell 25 per cent; femicides increased by 160 per cent; the government stopped funding shelters for battered women, and in 1981 the Office of Domestic Violence closed; pro-natalist bombed and set fire to abortion clinics and harassed their staff and patients; Medicaid ceased to fund legal abortion and several states restricted legal abortion and the provision of information about abortion (Neuman, 2010: 136-137). The Televangelists claimed that feminists influenced women negatively, encouraging them to become lesbians and to leave their husbands, to kill their children, to practice witchcraft and to destroy capitalism, adding that homosexuality was a sin that was punished with AIDS.

The United States Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), designed to guarantee equality to all citizens regardless of gender, and proposed to Congress in 1923 as an amendment, laid the foundations for the new feminist movement that started in the 1960s. In those years, the Women's Liberation Movement emerged, and it brought radical changes within the movement. As Chiara Severgnini has pointed out in her article for the Italian daily newspaper *La Stampa*, after the World War II, the United States witnessed a significant economic growth that contributed to damage those social structures that had already been questioned during the war, when women substituted for men in factories, while they were at war (2016). The personal became political, the movement “extended the terms 'politics' and 'the economy' to sexuality, the body and emotions, and other areas of social life previously treated as 'personal' only, and the household” (Humm, 1992: 3). They dealt with issues deemed to be scandalous at that time, such as sexuality, rape, domestic violence and reproductive rights. For instance, in 1961 the first pill, a means to control women's fertility was put on market in the States. Something like this was unthinkable before.

In 1968, the militant feminism that had started in the United States reached also Great Britain with the British Women's Liberation Movement. Here the movement had a great impact also on the 1968 Ford Strike for equal pay. Their agenda included “demands for equal pay, 24-hour child care, free contraception, and abortion on demand” (Humm, 1992: 6), sexual and domestic violence.

Starting from the second half of the 1970s, an American feminist anti-pornography movement developed within the broader feminist movement. This group of feminists initially started its battles against the sexually explicit content of the media that often portrayed scenes of sexual violence. They opposed those images that reinforced gender stereotypes and celebrated violence. Almost simultaneously, on the belief that it was at the core of women's oppression, they began to focus on the issue of pornography. They thought that pornography objectified women and encouraged men to sexually harass, despise and use women as they liked. In 1979 a group of radical feminists founded the activist organization Women Against Pornography (WAP) in New York. They protested against all those television programs, movies, advertisement and magazines that suggested that women could be abused and humiliated. On 20 October 1979 about 5000 activists sponsored by WAP marched through Times Square to protest against pornography. At the end of the march some feminists “spoke out against the pornography industry, which they said exploited women and women's bodies and

encouraged violence against women” (Basler, 1979). Many anti-pornography feminists took legal actions to battle and eventually ban pornography.

4.1.1. Atwood's Perspective

From the 1957, Margaret Atwood started attending Victoria College at the University of Toronto to study British literature. Actually, this was a crucial moment for the shaping of her feminist sentiment. Unlike the policy of the majority of universities at that time, Victoria College hired women, furthermore it favoured the involvement of women in intellectual dialogues. This tolerant atmosphere was in contrast to the close-minded world outside it, where there was a certain antagonism and discrimination against women and Atwood was aware of it. Nonetheless, she succeeded as a writer and especially as a poet during the very beginning of her career, also reading her poetical compositions at the Bohemian Embassy, where she met the young poet Gwendolyn MacEwan with whom she had conversations about the issue of being a female poet in a male literary world. Also, when she started attending Radcliffe College (later part of Harvard University) she found that it was a men's world, and still women didn't have the same rights as men: for instance they could not enter Lamont Library, or during classes break, it was women who had to serve tea and cookies.

Atwood found that discrimination was also part of the workplace, since women did not earn the same salaries as men and they had to resign from their job after marriage. This awareness strengthened her feminist resolve. However, Atwood herself is very careful about the use of the term “feminism” and its various connotations. Although she often portrays female characters subjected to patriarchy, and despite being committed to women's rights, she eschews identification with the feminist movement. In the first place, she has argued that writers can be considered feminists only if they write consciously within the movement itself. Her first book, *The Edible Woman* was labelled as the voice of feminism, but she resisted such definition since when she wrote it she was in Canada where there was no feminist movement yet. When asked whether she considers herself as a feminist, Atwood replies that she needs the term “feminism” to be clarified before answering, indeed she recognizes different types of feminism. If the meaning is that women are always right or they are superior to men she completely dissociates from it. Rather, her feminism identifies women's rights with basic human rights, and consequently it advocates equality between men and women. Atwood “is

reluctant to link herself with more activist definitions of the term and prefers not to be identified as an activist writer” (Grace, 2010: 50). Once, she even claimed that if anti-male feminists took over the government, she would oppose them.

4.1.2. Atwood and the #MeToo Movement

In 2006, Tarana Burke, a social activist and survivor of sexual violence, coined the phrase “Me Too” to help all the other women who had been victims of sexual abuse. On October 2017 the actress Ashley Judd broke the silence and publicly accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment in an article by *The New York Times*. Later, dozens of other women accused Weinstein of abuses over a period of 30 years, and in the course of a few weeks many other men were accused of sexual misconduct.

Actress Alyssa Milano soon encouraged all the women who had been harassed to spread Burke's phrase “Me Too” stating that “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem” (Khomami, 2017). And indeed, within a few days, million of women, from celebrities and public figures to ordinary people, used social networks to reveal the sexual abuses they had undergone, thus giving birth to a movement that is allowing women to denounce this issue. Unfortunately, if initially the movement was a tool for women empowerment, now it has become, as the American journalist Bari Weiss has defined it, “an emblem for female helplessness” (Grady, 2018), and a way to besmirch, often gratuitously, the accused without any evidence and even before a just and official process, because it seems that women are always right by nature.

Very recently, Margaret Atwood has expressed some scepticism towards the #MeToo movement which has aroused bitter controversy. In 2016 the chair of the University of British Columbia's creative writing program, Steven Galloway, was fired due to an accusation of sexual assault. The news became public even before there was an inquiry, and more seriously, before the accused knew the detail of such accusation. Also, he had to sign a confidentiality agreement which prevented him from saying anything to defend himself, thus allowing other people to attack him publicly. However, the most credible version is that Galloway had an affair which lasted several years with the complainant who accused him claiming that the relationship was not consensual. Although a judge proved that there had been no sexual assault, Galloway was fired anyway. Many people were not satisfied with how the University handled the situation,

with Galloway fired and his reputation and mental health completely ruined: since some observers thought that he could take his own life, he was committed to a psychiatric unit against his will (Grady, 2018).

On November 2016 a group of Canadian authors, Atwood included, signed an open letter demanding that the University of British Columbia “be held accountable for the way it handled sexual misconduct allegations against Galloway and his subsequent termination” (Nathoo, 2018). These authors rightly maintained that the investigation was carried out unfairly and had to be public, a legitimate observation, since UBC created the impression that Galloway was only a violent serial rapist, a danger to the university community, even though the allegations were unexamined and not verified. Thus, what these authors asked for, was a fair process and a fair treatment for Professor Galloway. However, many contemporary feminists and activists of the #MeToo movement have deeply criticized the letter and the fact that these authors were only supporting Galloway, probably because he is a fellow writer and friends with many of them. As a consequence, some authors removed their name from the letter, but fortunately, even though they acknowledged that the original letter did not express concern for the victims of sexual assault and so they expressed their solidarity with them, many other authors defended their position, also Margaret Atwood. Indeed, as she has explained, what emerges from this case is that, according to the common belief, women are always right and never lie, and men are always guilty. As a consequence, this dynamic “do a great disservice to accusing women and abuse survivors, since it discredits any accusation immediately” (Grady, 2018).

The 78 year-old Canadian author has been attacked for her comments about the Galloway case, as for instance: “If @MargaretAtwood would like to stop warring amongst women, she should stop declaring war against younger, less powerful women and start listening”, wrote one user on Twitter, while another user wrote “In today's dystopian news: One of the most important feminist voices of our time shifts on less powerful women to uphold the power of her powerful male friend” (Kassam, 2018).

In January, she wrote an op-ed for the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail*, where she responded to the “Good Feminist accusers”, as she calls them, who have unjustly criticized her: “It seems that I am a 'Bad Feminist' [...] conducting a War on Women” (Atwood, 2018). Advocating the most reasonable feminist vision, Atwood points out what should be obvious:

that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They're not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. If they were, we wouldn't need a legal system (2018).

If they were incapable of agency or of making moral decisions they also should not own property, have access to higher education, and have their own independence. Actually, what Atwood believes, and what all the feminists should believe, is that “in order to have civil and human rights for women there have to be civil and human rights, period, including the right to fundamental justice” (2018). In other words, here Atwood is simply advocating the just concept “innocent until proven guilty” as one of the basis for a civilised society, and it is inconceivable and upsetting that she has been attacked so ferociously. As she explains, it seems that these feminists “are feeding into the very old narrative that holds women to be incapable of fairness or of considered judgment” (2018), and this is exactly that type of vision that relegates women to the position of inferior, weak and helpless being who are incapable of thinking or having their own ideas, and that gives to the opponents of feminism a reason to deny women positions of power and thus to submit them.

And indeed, in the op-ed she compares the UBC proceedings (and probably also the #MeToo movement accusations) to the Salem witchcraft trials, when people were found guilty without any evidence just because they were accused. Clearly this structure has applied to many other episodes in human history, such as in the French Revolution or Stalin's purges in the Soviet Union, for instance, where the rules of justice were bypassed. As she notes, such things occur when there is a lack of justice in the system and thus, vigilante justice substitutes legal processes: people solve problems on their own. However, the danger is that vigilante justice can turn into “a culturally solidified lynch-mob habit” (2018). This is exactly the case of the #MeToo movement, which Atwood defines as “a symptom of a broken legal system” (2018), where women have difficulty in being heard by institutions, and therefore they decide to resort to a new tool, namely the internet. Indeed, the #MeToo movement is bringing to light an issue that has always been known, but that nobody has never had the courage to openly address hitherto. However, at the same time, even though she partly acknowledges the importance of such phenomenon, Atwood is worried about what will happen next: “In

time of extremes, extremists win. Their ideology becomes a religion, anyone who doesn't puppet their views is seen as an apostate, a heretic or a traitor, and moderates in the middle are annihilated” (2018).

4.2. A Feminist Narrative

The Handmaid's Tale has long been subject of debate within the feminist movement. There are feminists who consider it as a feminist novel which denounces gender inequalities. However, if it is true that it partly focuses on women as marginalized individuals within society, after an accurate analysis, many other feminists and critics have rightly argued that Atwood's narrative also conceals a critique to contemporary feminism.

Gilead is the realization of 1980s backlash against women's rights. In the last 20 years, women have witnessed an improvement in their access to education, to higher professions and legal abortion and in divorce law. However, at the same time, there were some people that did not like the idea of a world where women were gaining always more freedom. Atwood was aware of the precariousness of women's achievements, that there were people who opposed their newly acquired rights, actively eroding them. Thus by the 1980s, “those who hoped to retrench some of the gains of feminism had made significant inroads on the successes of the 1970s” (Neuman, 2010: 136). Through the perspective of the Handmaid Offred, Atwood explores the issue of gender inequality both in the personal and the political realms, in a world where women are enslaved in a patriarchal totalitarianism.

In every dystopia there is a utopia, and in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's utopia is her lost past, her previous life. At one point of her narrative she clearly expresses her desire: “I want everything back, the way it was” (Atwood, 1996: 132). However, Atwood's strategy to insert flashbacks of Offred's past, that is the 1980s (Atwood's present), into the description of this imaginary future, is the means through which she criticizes this historical period, showing how women were not in safety. The past was much better than Gilead for women, however it was not idyllic. They were free, they had access to a high education, they could have a job, their own family, intimate relationships. At the same time, Atwood wants to tell us that women were not protected, as Offred points out:

I never ran at night; an in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads. [...] I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night" (Atwood, 1996: 34).

And again, date rape was a very frequent phenomenon; there were stories about women found in "ditches or forests or refrigerators in abandoned rented rooms, with their clothes on or off, sexually abused or not" or "precautions you took that had to do with locks on windows and doors, drawing the curtains, leaving on the lights" (Atwood, 1996: 238); children were not safe either: "no children walked to school anymore, there had been too many disappearances" (Atwood, 1996: 184) ; the gap "between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't [?] Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off" (Atwood, 1996: 231); and if women

"did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they'd have to go on welfare. Or else he'd stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children in daycare or left with some brutal ignorant woman, and they'd have to pay for that themselves, out of their wretched little paycheques" (Atwood, 1996: 231).

Women's utopia is not in the time before. What Atwood is trying to tell to her readers is that utopia can be achieved only by paying attention to the social context we live in, and to bear witness. What we take for granted can disappear at any time.

All the feminists struggles and achievements of the last decades have been completely nullified: women that after centuries of alienation have finally gained the right to participate to public life, are confined to the domestic sphere once again. Offred tells how she lost everything, from her job to her bank account within a single day.

Denying women the possibility to have a job and to own properties, the new government has made them dependent on men like in the past, just as in the Victorian Age. They are only expected to stay at home, to take care of the household, to provide children to society and to raise and educate them. Concealing their bodies and face from men, Handmaids' uniforms have the function to desexualize them. Offred and all the other Handmaids are “a perverse version of the Victorian Angel in the House, the idealized, self-sacrificing wife and mother with whom (Virginia) Woolf does battle in order to express herself as a writer” (Dunn, 2010: 77). At the same time, the uniform ironically symbolizes the Handmaids' function within society which is merely sexual. As Jennifer Dunn has pointed out, not only does the red colour refer to the sexual act of reproduction, but it also “retains historical connotations of both sexual allure and sexual shame” (2010: 77). The Handmaids' red dress and their forced seclusion echo Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. In this novel the heroine Hester Prynne is forced to wear a scarlet “A” on her dress standing for “adulteress” for the rest of her life, as a symbol of the sin she has committed. Moreover, prevented from forming relations with other people, both Offred and Hester suffer from their state of alienation.

Their inaccessibility makes the Handmaids objects of taboo desire, they are a forbidden fruit, especially for those categories of men that are not allowed to have a woman. Offred describes the moment when two Guardians are staring at her and Ofglen while they are passing by: “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” (Atwood, 1996: 32). Dunn explains how this scene exemplifies the feminist theory of the male gaze which objectifies women. The action of looking involves the subjects who looks, the active male, and the objects is looked at, the passive female. The male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure. Thus the woman is the bearer of meaning, and the gazer is free to project any kind of meaning onto her (2010: 78).

Actually, apart from their classification and dresses, there are other examples proving that Handmaids are considered mere objects. When the Commander gives Offred a new uniform and brings her to Jezebel's, Offred describes:

He retains hold of my arm, and as he talks his spine straightens imperceptibly, his chest expands [...]. He is showing me off, to them, and they understand that, they are decorous enough, they keep their

hands to themselves, but they review my breasts, my legs, as if there's no reason why they shouldn't. But also he is showing off to me. He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. He's breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them, getting away with it (Atwood, 1996: 248).

Here again we have the gaze that reduces women to sexualized objects. Just as all the prostitutes that work there she is on display: the other men are projecting their sexual fantasies onto her. At the same time, the Commander himself shows his own mastery of her. His grip on her arm symbolizes that she's his own property completely in his power.

Gilead is based on a system of binary divisions which opposes male, associated with power, autonomy and public to female, conversely associated with weakness, dependence and private. This system, typical of all patriarchal societies, suppresses the principle of equality and promotes a hierarchy in which the term female is subordinate to male. Even the relationship Offred has with the Commander exemplifies this hierarchical system. Indeed, they are not on equal terms, and Offred's subordination reinforces his position of authority and power. Similarly, also the Jezebels are in a subordinate positions to the men who sexually exploit them.

4.3. The Anti-Heroine: Offred

Within Atwood's dystopian world, Offred is perhaps the less revolutionary woman. She is a non-confrontational and cowardly anti-heroine who is constantly weighing the pros and cons of collaborating with the regime, and who always prefers survival to rebellion. Surely her narrative is her small act of resistance through which she challenges the system, yet, by merely telling her story she does not effect change. Despite her antipathy towards the regime, she does not want to join the resistance movement, and as a consequence she indirectly collaborates with the regime, passively adapting to the new system and surrendering her body, behaviour that guarantees her survival. However, even in the past before the coup, Offred had a complicit behaviour that helped paving the way for the establishment of the regime. She took much for granted, not realizing that the world around her was gradually changing. Resigned to her new life she admits:

We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.

Nothing changes instantaneously [...] There were stories in the newspapers, of course [...] but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew. The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others (Atwood, 1996: 66).

Her willed ignorance prevents her from resisting the actions that lead to the rise of the theocracy. Unfortunately, how she learns at her cost, willed ignorance “is sister to victimization and to passive acceptance of blame for what is done to one” (Neuman, 2010:145). Thus, Atwood wants to tell her readers that being politically aware and constantly paying attention to what is happening is fundamental to prevent such happenings.

Actually, the decision to portray the protagonist and narrator as passive seems the most reasonable choice since it allows the readers to easily identify with her, whereas being heroic is much more difficult. Offred herself acknowledges her own passivity and lack of heroism. She is a highly self-conscious narrator, aware of the contradictions within herself, and she openly accuses herself of cowardice. “I wish it (this story) showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia” (Atwood, 1996: 279). She thinks much but acts little. Whimpering, she simply watches as the world surrounding her starts falling to pieces.

Every time she has the occasion, she tries to gain some power, even by means of small actions. One instance of this is when she notices that the two guardians are watching her and she starts moving her hips deliberately:

It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach [...]. I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; [...] I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds (Atwood, 1996: 32).

Even though passive, for Offred this is an act of subversion and resistance to the regime:

her body is something that they cannot have access to, in a sense, she holds them in thrall. However, thus, Offred displays a complicit behaviour. She seems more the heroine of a romance novel, rather than of a feminist narrative.

4.3.1. The Romance Plot

What Offred really yearns for in order to survive, is communication and trust between individuals instead of isolation and suspicion. Rather than actively planning her rebellion or flight, which would be too risky, Offred decides to completely rely on relationships with men to resist within the regime: with Nick and the Commander in the present, while her husband Luke is evoked through memories of the past.

Offred's passivity and complicity, together with the “invocation of romance clichés, lead some readers [...] to question the novel's commitment with feminism” (Grace, 2010: 51). She first starts an unconventional relationship with the Commander, and then she embarks on a love affair with Nick. Meanwhile she indulges in nostalgic memories of her romantic relationship with Luke. Offred's romance plot involves three different male characters.

Many critics have argued that love appears as the only force within this nightmarish society able to subvert Gilead's power. Indeed, despite all the restrictions imposed by the regime, love continues to survive. Since Gilead's policies suppress it, its very existence challenges the system. In the case of Offred, love is not that powerful force that inspires the protagonist to rebel and to dismantle the Gileadean political and social structure from within, but it helps Offred by making her existence bearable, thus leading her to abandon the idea of escaping, in favour of her relationship with Nick. She also takes some advantages from her singular relationship with the Commander, while before the coup, even her husband Luke displayed certain negative connotations.

Offred has assigned different roles to “her men”. Luke, her real love, is her husband and the father of her daughter; the Commander is her “sugar-daddy”, as Madonne Miner defines him (2010: 114); and finally Nick is her lover, with whom she has an illicit affair.

Miner rightly compares Luke with the Commander. After an accurate reading indeed, it becomes easy to find some similarities between the two, such as the insistence upon certain old values and a position of superiority within relationships with women in a society which expects women to depend on men.

Throughout the narrative, Offred often recalls her husband's attitude to show off his high education or his knowledge and interest in foreign languages for instance. One of the times she is reflecting on the meaning of the word “fraternize”, Offred thinks:

Fraternize means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister. Sororize, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin. He liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages (Atwood, 1996: 21).

Later on, when she is thinking about the word “mayday”, Offred remembers that it was her husband who explained to her the derivation and the meaning of the word: “*Mayday, Mayday*, for pilots whose planes had been hit, and ships- was it ships too?-at sea. [...] Do you know what it came from? Said Luke. Mayday? [...] It's French, he said. From *M'aidez*” (Atwood, 1996: 53-54). It is undeniable that he actually has a higher education compared to Offred, education which involves also Latin, the language studied and spoken by privileged and leading figures, and subtly uses this knowledge to reaffirm “classical gender roles and inequalities” (Miner, 2010: 116). By constantly displaying his knowledge, Luke places himself on a superior level in his marriage with the narrator.

Luke's employment of Latin recalls that of the Commander. Similarly, Fred knows Latin and often plays with its usages. We learn about his knowledge during one of his secret meetings with Offred, when she asks him to translate the phrase she found carved on the floor “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*”. Not able to spell it, she writes it down. As he reads it, he immediately bursts out laughing: “That's not real Latin,” he says. “That's just a joke” (Atwood, 1996: 196), and he gives her an old textbook:

'It's sort of hard to explain why it's funny unless you know Latin,' he says. 'We used to write all kinds of things like that. I don't know where we got them, from older boys perhaps.' [...] in the margin is scrawled: *pim pis pit, pimus pistis pants*. 'There was another one,' he says. '*Cim, cis, cit...*' He stops, returning to the present, embarrassed (Atwood, 1996: 196-197).

Surely these are schoolboy jokes, more childish and less refined than those of Luke. However, both games have the same purpose, that is to assert their superiority and therefore “to keep women in the position of the unempowered” (Miner, 2010: 117).

Both the Commander and Luke share the same interest in old things and especially old ideas. The Commander, for instance, has a collection of old magazines and one night he gives Offred a *Vogue* from the seventies, claiming that he keeps that material because he retains “an appreciation for the old things” (Atwood, 1996: 166). There are other old things that he appreciates, such as the prostitutes at Jezebels all wearing costumes from the past with feathers and sequins, “Some are in olden-days lingerie, shortie nightgowns, baby-doll pyjamas, the occasional see-through negligée” (Atwood, 1996: 246-247). And indeed, while they are strolling among all those men and women, he comments: “It's like walking into the past' [...] His voice sounds pleased, delighted even” (Atwood, 1996: 247). However, this past that pleases him is a past where women are objects exhibited for men.

Likewise, also Luke enjoys the pleasure of old things, as the narrator points out. He likes old books for instance, as much as he likes old ideas and values. Just as the Commander who advocates gender inequality and indeed he is an exponent of Gilead's policies, also Luke appears to be in favour of differences between the sexes. For instance, when Offred and Luke are shopping:

He liked to choose what kind of meat we were going to eat during the week. He said men needed more meat than women did, and that it wasn't a superstition and he wasn't being a jerk, studies had been done. There are some differences, he said. He was fond of saying that, as if I was trying to prove there weren't (Atwood, 1996: 73).

This may seem an innocent remark, but since Luke repeatedly makes such comments, it becomes evident that there is something more at stake, especially when he argues with the narrator mother. Listening to her affirming that men are useless and that women can do without them, Luke “didn't mind, he teased her by pretending to be macho, he'd tell her women were incapable of abstract thought” (Atwood, 1996: 131). Similarly, the Commander tells Offred that “women can't add [...] For them, one and one and one and one don't make four” but they make “just one and one and one and one” (Atwood, 1996:

195).

In their view, clearly based on gender stereotypes, not only are women incapable of abstract thought, but they are also unable to put concepts together. Thus, as Miner has claimed, relational dynamics between these two men and other women are evident: if women are incapable of abstract thought, then women will have to accept such thought from men; once this dynamic is established, another follows as a matter of course: women depend on men intellectually, economically, physically, emotionally” (2010: 119).

When the narrator loses her job and her bank account is transferred to her husband, as a consequence she loses also her independence. Thus, she must depend on Luke who now controls all the incomes of the household. The dynamic of their marriage changes completely, and Offred is well aware of this:

Something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll. I felt love going forward without me.

He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his” (Atwood, 1996: 191-192).

They are not on equal terms anymore. As soon as Offred learns of her losses, she turns to look in search of consolation:

Did they say why? I said.

He didn't answer that. We'll get through it, he said, hugging me.

You don't know what it's like, I said. I feel as if somebody cut off my feet. I wasn't crying. Also, I couldn't put my arms around him.

It's only a job, he said, trying to soothe me [...] You know I'll always take care of you.

I thought, already he's starting to patronize me (Atwood, 1996: 188).

Even though Luke is sympathetic with the narrator he does not answer to her question “Did they say why?”. The question suggests that perhaps Luke has access to an answer,

while the fact that he ignores her question implicates him in some way. And again, Offred immediately understands that Luke is somehow subjugating her, just as the Commander will have control over Offred's life in Gilead: in both relationships there is no space for equal interaction.

A significant moment in Offred marriage with Luke involves their attempt to escape to Canada and the use of passports. Offred's account of the episode suggests that Luke is arranging their flight only out of love for Offred and their daughter, however, Miner notes how the actual text of her account reveals that there is something more at stake:

He began to drive very quickly, and after that there was the dirt road and the woods and we jumped out of the car and began to run. A cottage, to hide in, a boat, I don't know what we thought. He said the passports were foolproof, and we had so little time to plan. Maybe he had a plan, a map of some kind in his head. As for me, I was only running: away, away. I don't want to be telling this story (Atwood, 1996: 237).

The narrator is incriminating Luke here. It is Luke who says that the passports are foolproof, that he has a plan in mind, but he doesn't tell Offred what kind of plan is, and who is involved. Moreover, the concluding sentence suggests that perhaps Luke's plan is larger than Offred imagines, that the story she does not want to tell is the story of Luke betraying her.

The concept of betrayal allows us to draw another parallel between Luke and the Commander. Before marrying Offred, Luke secretly dated her while he was still married with his first wife. Thus, Offred is invading the territory of another woman as Moira teels her: “She disapproved of Luke, back then. Not of Luke but of the fact that he was married. She said I was poaching, on another woman's ground” (Atwood, 1996: 180). Whatever the reason, Luke betrays his wife. This love triangle recalls another love triangle: that involving Offred, the Commander and Serena Joy. Again, she begins an “affair” with a man married with another woman. Further, when they go to Jezebel's, The Commander takes Offred to the same hotel where she spent many nights with Luke. In describing the scene, Offred insists on sameness:

Everything is the same, the very same as it was, once upon a time. The drapes are the same, the heavy flowered ones that match the bedspread, orange poppies on royal blue, and the thin white ones to draw against the sun; the bureau and bedside tables [...] the pictures on the walls [...]. All is the same (Atwood, 1996: 263).

The present setting completely identical to the past setting recalls the idea that also the present interaction is the same of the past interaction: an unmarried woman with a married man.

Although reluctant, the narrator is unconsciously aware that Moira's arguments are sound. Significantly, soon after the marriage, she has a dream: they are in their new apartment which is empty except for some clothes that, as the narrator tells: "I think they're my clothes, but they don't look like mine, I've never seen them before. Maybe they are clothes belonging to Luke's wife" (Atwood, 1996: 84). Those clothes are not the narrator's property, they probably belong to Luke's previous wife. Offred refers to her as his wife, not ex-wife. This suggests that Offred still feels as the "other woman" who has clothes that do not fit: they are hers but at the same time they are not hers, a clear metaphor of Luke. The dream may express the doubts Offred has about her marriage with Luke, and about Luke himself who is a betrayer.

The same situation arises again at the Commander's household. Once again, Offred is the protagonist of a triangle, again, she is the other woman:

How about your wife?

He seemed to think about that. No, he said. She wouldn't understand. Anyway, she won't talk to me much any more. We don't seem to have much in common these days. So there it was, out in the open: his wife didn't understand him. That's what I was there for, then. The same old thing (Atwood, 1996: 166)

Offred is not impressed, she already knows this plot, and she feels guilty about Serena Joy:

I felt I was an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers. [...] I was taking something away from her, although she didn't know it. I was filching. Never mind that it was something she apparently didn't want or had no use for, had rejected even; still, it was hers, and if I took it away, this mysterious 'it' I couldn't quite define [...] what would be left for her? (Atwood, 1996: 170).

Structurally speaking, Luke and the Commander are twins. Although Offred refuses to recognize the parallels and the connection there are between them, the text speaks for itself and repeatedly insists upon them. These similarities between them help also to make some considerations about the time before the establishment of the regime. Even though Offred desires so fervently to have her previous life back, she misses her husband and would like to embrace him again, after an accurate reading, Luke does not appear as a positive character anymore. Actually, the romance between him and the narrator shows how even before the coup, certain patriarchal ideas and values were already deeply rooted in society.

However, among Offred's predicaments there is also real love. Nick is responsible of Offred sexual awakening and renewed hope. Through her affair with him she comes to life and succeeds in escaping from Gilead, and consequently records her tale. Conversely to Luke and the Commander, Nick does not show off any knowledge of “patriarchal languages of power” (Miner, 2010: 124), and he does not involve Offred in a love triangle, since Nick is an unmarried man. But most importantly, he really cares for Offred and he risks his life to save her when he tells her to go with the Eyes. There is the possibility that Nick is not sincere, but the very fact that her account is in our hands, suggests that Nick tells the truth. Thus, the lover turns out to be her saviour. Nick functions as a fairytale prince, the knight who rescues her. However, just as the love story which saw Luke as one of the two protagonists, even the one involving Nick has to be interpreted with skepticism. Indeed, there is a connection between the two love stories: both have a negative influence on Offred.

When married with Luke, the narrator tends to give in to him. When a woman kidnaps their daughter in a supermarket, Luke immediately convinces Offred that such incidents are isolated events. When she considers the possibility of partaking in women's marches, she is dissuaded by Luke: “Luke said it would be futile and I had to

think about them, my family, him and her” (Atwood, 1996: 189). Again, apart from his power to manipulate the narrator, Luke clearly expresses his ideas about the right place of a woman within society: at home taking care of the family. When several weeks have passed since the last time Offred received news from her mother, Offred is worried and she is determined to call the police but: “Don't, said Luke. Why not? I said. I was glaring at him, I was angry now. He stood there in the wreck of the living room, just looking at me. [...] Just don't, is what he said” (Atwood, 1996: 265). And Offred obviously obeys.

Later, as soon as she begins an affair with Nick, she completely abandons the idea to join the Mayday or to escape: “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (Atwood, 1996: 283). Offred prefers romance to political action. She “‘makes a life for herself,’ a life involving no community or political commitment, but only commitment to ‘having a man’” (Miner, 2010: 127).

In this sense, Offred's meditation on the concept of “falling in love” are interesting: “*Falling in love*, we said; *I fell for him*. We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion: so lovely, like flying, and yet at the same time so dire, so extreme, so unlikely” (Atwood, 1996: 237). Offred is a fallen woman herself, who surrenders herself first to Luke and then to Nick.

4.4. Positive Feminine Models

Offred's narrative gives voice to other characters, thus providing also positive feminine models, who refuse to accept the role that society has imposed on them and therefore struggle and rebel against it. Unfortunately, as many other dystopias have demonstrated, acts of physical resistance are doomed to fail, the protagonists will succumb to the new dictatorial government. In this sense, also *The Handmaid's Tale* provide instances, from Offred's failed escape attempt before being indoctrinated at the Rachel and Leah Center, to Ofglen, who eventually commits suicide, and Moira's failed attempt, who ends up at Jezebel's where she will spend the remainder of her days. Offred's mother, Moira and Ofglen may be seen as Offred's active doubles, they are complementary figures. They “provide Offred's narration with what she lacks: an aspect of active physical rebelliousness” (Mohr, 2005: 257). However, a distinction between Ofglen and Moira has to be drawn.

Surely, Moira is the typical female rebel. Offred sees her as the embodiment of female heroism. She is always funny and ironic, and all the Handmaids at the Centre are full of admiration for her: “Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd” (Atwood, 1996: 143). However, at the same time she is strongly individual. Offred often praises Moira's heroism, but her resistance is dictated by the will to survive. While Moira takes action only to free herself, Ofglen's resistance is altruistic, indeed she is a member of the Mayday, the underground resistance and she takes action to help and rescue other people. For instance, during the episode of the Particicution, Handmaids are told to kill a man who is guilty of rape, but Ofglen knows that he is a member of the resistance and thus, she immediately kills him to spare him further pain. At the end, when unmasked, she commits suicide to protect the other members of the Mayday. Ofglen eventually fails but she fights until the end, Moira fails because she surrenders to the authority of Gilead offering her body to the regime, thus disappointing Offred's expectations, who hoped for and imagined a heroic ending for her friend.

If Offred is a passive woman who prefers survival to resistance, her mother is a fighter. She is “a product of the civil rights movement and marched in rallies for women's rights” (Bolton, 2010: 72). She joined the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s advocating women's freedom, and she continued to be a political activist even under the regime, until her disappearance. Later, Offred discovers that she has been declared an unwoman and then sent to the colonies. Apart from being a feminist icon, Offred's mother is fundamental for Offred's understanding of the importance of her mother's political activism. Indeed, before Gilead, Offred deliberately chose not to follow her mother's political commitment because she was not aware that there were forces actually threatening the society she lived in. As soon as she is deprived of her previous life, Offred gradually comes to understand her mother and to admire her courage. Often her mother is evoked in her past memories. For instance when they are together in a park where there are “some women burning books [...] There were some men, too, among the women, and the books were magazines (Atwood, 1996: 48), or when her mother comes home with a group of other women after they had taken part in an abortion riot with “a bruise on her face, and a little blood” (Atwood, 1996: 189). Offred also remembers her mother's feminist ideas about men: “Why pretend, she'd say. Anyway what do I need it for, I don't want a man around, what use are they

except for ten seconds' worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women”, and her reproaches when she accuses Offred's indifference to social issues and her political irresponsibility:

You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at him (Luke), slicing up the carrots. Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's bodies, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far? (Atwood, 1996: 130-131).

Offred's mother's presence continues to be felt also after her disappearance: Offred continues to converse with her in her mind in order to keep her alive: “Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me?” (Atwood, 1996: 137).

4.5. Wicked Women

As a supporter of the feminism that advocates human rights and therefore gender equality, through *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood further demonstrates that she is not interested in idealizing women or in portraying them as tragic victims. Gilead's social classification does not only separate men from women, but it also separates women from each other. Interestingly, within the regime there is no simple gender division between masculine and feminine. Just as men, also women are capable of violence. She opposes the typical representation of women as victims and men as oppressors that made women intrinsically good and men intrinsically bad, by portraying a society in which also most men are oppressed: homosexuals, Roman Catholic priests, both female and male Quakers, and gynecologists who perform abortion.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood shows how women are “multidimensional individuals who should never be condemned, even by feminists, to stereotypical roles” (Appleton, 2010: 276), and indeed she decides to portray female villains. Sarah Appleton has thus investigated Atwood's interest in female badness, which started when she was very young with Grimm's fairytales. Of course, she was delighted by the typical heroines of fairytales, such as passive or adventurous common girls and princesses, wise women, and good fairies, but at the same time she was aware that there were also cruel

witches, bad stepmothers, wicked sisters and stepsisters. Likewise, Atwood decided to portray an imaginary world where also women can be bad and whose morality is questionable.

Female complicity is fundamental to the system of oppression of other women and to the maintenance of order. Some women are complicit in this patriarchal system which objectifies many other women, such as high-ranking women, that is the Aunts or the Wives. However, also low-ranking women are enemies. Econowives envy Handmaids for their privileges and higher status, while Marthas criticize Handmaids for their immoral lifestyle which can be compared to that of a prostitute: Rita, one of the two Marthas in the Commander's household, indeed claims that “she wouldn't debase herself like that” (Atwood, 1996: 20).

The Aunts and the Wives belong to the female elite, but it is the Aunts who hold some true power within Gileadean society. They are represented ironically. Although they are portrayed as motherly figures, they are the paramilitary organization of the regime, and they are responsible for the indoctrination of the Handmaids, for law enforcement, and, when citizens do not obey rules, for their punishment. Perhaps, Aunt Lydia is the most sadistic figure within Offred's narrative.

Also the Wives are enemies. Actually, the Handmaid is an intruder in the Wife's own households, she is “a competitor for her husband's affection and sexual desire, and, ultimately, for the highly prized role of mother” (Dunn, 2010: 81). Serena Joy is an instance, she despises Offred and barely communicates with her: “She doesn't speak to me, unless she can't avoid it. I am a reproach to her; and a necessity” (Atwood, 1996: 23). She can be compared to the wicked stepmother of fairytales. The first time they meet, Serena Joy warns her: “I want to see as little of you as possible, (she said). I expect you feel the same way about me. [...] I know you aren't stupid [...] if I get trouble, I'll give trouble back” (Atwood, 1996: 25). She is past child-bearing age and therefore she needs a Handmaid if she wants to become a mother, a role that would grant her prestige and ensure her safety. However, she does not like the idea of having a stranger invading her territory. Just as Offred, Serena Joy is somehow a victim of the system, she is imprisoned in her role and she spends her days knitting, gardening or even pretending to be ill so that other women pay her a visit. Also Serena Joy is living a precarious life. Just as Offred could be sent to the Colonies to clean up toxic wastes if she fails to give birth to a child, also Serena Joy risks the same faith. She belongs to the female elite only thanks to her husband's protection. Thus her rage and coldness are due

to the fact that she is aware of her precarious position within society, and “she must use all of her strength for self-preservation” (Appleton, 2010: 280). When she discovers that the Commander has taken Offred to Jezebel's she accuses her “How could you be so vulgar?” and she says to her “Just like the other one. A slut. You'll end up the same”, but at the same time she significantly comments: “‘Behind my back,’ (she says). ‘You could have left me something’” (Atwood, 1996: 299). When the black van has come to take Offred away, she reacts with fear because the Handmaid is the only chance she has to keep her privileged position.

Both Aunt Lydia and Serena Joy may be based on the figure of Phyllis Schlafly. She was a conservative political activist and antifeminist active during the second half of the 20th century, who opposed the Equal Rights Amendment and all the feminist achievements of those years. In her speech she told women to leave the public life in order to return home and take care of the family, thus letting their husbands to earn a living.

As Jennifer Dunn rightly points out, the isolation that women suffer in Gilead “fosters the culture of fear and [...] prevents solidarity among women” (2010: 82). Both Aunts and Wives act out of fear: as barren women, their survival is at risk, thus Aunts collaborate with the regime and oppress other women to save their lives, while Wives are forced to depend on Handmaids but they refuse to be sympathetic with them since they are their own rival.

Further, this climate of fear prevents Handmaids to trust each other: while Offred and Ofglen are doing the shopping in town, they test each other, unsure of the other's affiliation, and when Offred meets the new Ofglen, she is aware that she cannot immediately trust her. Indeed, when Offred uses the code word the new Ofglen discourages further discussion: “‘That isn't a term I remember. I'm surprised you do. You ought to make an effort...’ She pauses. ‘To clear your mind of such...’ She pauses again. ‘Echoes.’” and the narrator thinks: “‘Now I feel cold, seeping over my skin like water. What she is doing is warning me. She isn't one of us. But she knows’” (Atwood, 1996: 296). However, it might be also true that also Ofglen's replacement is too afraid to answer to Offred truthfully.

4.6. A Critique of Second Wave Feminism

With *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood also wants to criticize the North American feminist

movement that developed in the 1960s. Just as often it is a satire of patriarchy, the text is also a satire of feminist politics sometimes. Atwood addresses the limiting nature of the feminist utopia, analysing its weak points. She has skilfully juxtaposed flashbacks of 1970s feminism with descriptions of daily life in Gilead, showing how each informs the other, and indeed the narrative portrays a dystopian totalitarianism that has paradoxically met some of the feminist demands. Ironically, referring to old feminist who have now been classified as Unwomen, Aunt Lydia comments: “Mind you, some of their ideas were sound enough [...] We would have to condone some of their ideas, even today” (Atwood, 1996: 128)

It is thus essential to quote Aunt Lydia's statement once again: “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” (Atwood, 1996. 34). In portraying a society such as Gilead, Atwood demonstrates what would happen if feminist utopian goals were realized. Women are not sexually harassed, or they are not whistled at on the streets anymore, they are a protected category. Paradoxically, in all dictatorships, walking along the street is much safer. Just as in Gilead, feminists wanted to create a utopic space where men were prevented from harming women, and where women could feel safe. In Gilead even government guards are not allowed to have sexual relations with women until they achieve seniority for instance. However, even though men's liberty has been restricted, women have not achieved liberation yet, rather, deprived of their previous life, they have been denied freedom to. “Take back the night” was one of the feminist slogans that demanded more protection for women. It was also a movement particularly strong in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s, that connected porn to all the type of violence undergone by women.

Among second wave feminists, there was a group of women whose agenda included also the struggle against pornography, a means that objectified women in their view. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Handmaids are shown old pornographic movies and videos at the Red Centre where they are told: “Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then. Her voice trembled with indignation” (Atwood, 1996: 128). Gilead has realized another feminist utopia, indeed the regime has outlawed pornography and any objectifying image of women. This clearly agrees with anti-porno feminists' beliefs. Offred remembers that she once attended a burning of sexually explicit books and magazines, and significantly, this episode is later recalled by the Commander giving Offred an illegal copy of *Vogue*.

Here Atwood clearly draws a parallel between Gileadean censorship and the censorship her mother and her friends hoped for. Atwood's narrative "shows how discourses of pro-censorship can easily be manipulated into values and ideas antithetical to feminism" (Rao, 1993: 145).

Atwood shows how slogans always risk to be reused as instruments of oppression, such as the 1970s feminist phrase "a women's culture", which Gilead has appropriated for its own purposes. And Aunt Lydia's language is an instance of this:

For the generations that come after, Aunt Lydia said, it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them [...] There can be bonds of real affection, she said, blinking at us ingratiatingly, under such conditions. Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task (Atwood, 1996: 171).

This vision of an ideal feminist society echoes the feminist project to create a society of communal living and shared labour where women help each other and fulfil the task assigned to them. Atwood demonstrated how this utopian vision becomes a dystopia as soon as it is realized. Imagining to converse with her feminist mother, also Offred herself draws a parallel between feminism and Gilead: "You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (Atwood, 1996: 137).

"The personal is political" is surely another famous feminist slogan that has been taken over by Gilead to oppress its citizens. There is no other place where the personal is political more than in Gilead, where reproduction, sexual intercourse, the institution of family and the organization of the household are all controlled by Gilead's politics.

The text presents contrasting positions within the feminist movement, and one of them is Moira's separatist position. Indeed, Moira represents the lesbian feminist point of view which advocates separatism, as it emerges from a debate between her and the narrator:

She said it was different, because the balance of power was equal

between women so sex was an even-steven transaction. [...]

I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away, I said. You couldn't just ignore them (Atwood, 1996: 180-181).

Moira's desire is the establishment of a female utopian society. In her view, “separatism is necessary for women in order to avoid being absorbed into 'masculine' structures and thinking [...] in order to 'survive' in a male-dominated society” (Rao, 1993: 19).

According to the separatist position, women can change the system by refusing to participate in unequal relationships with men, thus developing alternatives. With Gilead, Moira eventually witness the realization of her utopia, first at the Red Centre, a place for women only, and then at Jezebel's as a prostitute, where she can openly express her sexuality: when they meet at Jezebel's Moira tells Offred: “look at it this way: it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it” (Atwood, 1996: 261). However, as Offred points out, such a way of life does not allow change, rather it encourages marginalization. Eleonora Rao argues that this debate concerning the pros and the cons of separatism, points out that within the feminist movement and between women in general there are divisions. The lack of sisterhood and of unity within the movement allow totalitarian regimes such as Gilead to oppress and to subjugate women.

In this sense, also the narrator's mother's claims about men are questionable. Similarly to Gilead's binary opposition, her mother supported “gender categorizations and the labelling of the group of males, 'they', versus females, 'we'” (Staels, 1995: 162). This is the same dynamic advocated by Gilead that underlies power relations between sexes.

Hilde Staels notes how the text suggests that radical feminism somehow reinforced the system of belief of the American New Christian Right. Indeed, both shared the idea that biological differences between the sexes influence also their way of thinking and of feeling, thus justifying differentiated roles in society.

V. *The Handmaid's Tale* Today

5.1. The TV Show and Trump

At a distance of thirty-two years, *The Handmaid's Tale* continues to be significant, even for our age:

The novel that began as a satirical critique of religious and political trends in early 1980s North American society has slipped away from its historically specific context to become a political fable for our time, as if the present is rushing in to confirm Atwood's dire warnings about birth technologies, environmental pollution, human rights abuses, religious fanaticism, extreme right-wing political movements- and since 11 September 2001, international terrorism followed by the war in Iraq (Howells, 2010: 92)

The rising of Gilead is a consequence of a terrorist attack that suspends the constitution and overthrows the government. Inevitably, *The Handmaid's Tale* brings to mind the terrorist attacks of the 9/11, and more recently ISIS terrorism, and the consequent overwhelming fear they have caused among western countries.

A TV show by the same name, written by Bruce Miller and directed by Reed Morano, premiered on April 26, 2017, and it has had an immediate success among the audience thanks to its real-life parallels. Just as in the 1980s when the book came out, the tv series mirrors ideologies of 21st-century United States, especially after Donald Trump has been elected. Also in 1990 a film adaptation of the novel directed by Volker Schlöndorff came out, however, when asked to compare it to the Hulu series, Atwood answered that the dystopian world of *The Handmaid's Tale* is much closer to the 2010s than to the 1990s (Tiffany, 2017): concerns about women's freedoms under Trump's government have contributed to a renewed interest in the book. Indeed, the sales of the book increased by the 200% immediately after Trump's election, and it shot to the top of Amazon's bestseller list (Reilly, 2017).

Apart from the success it has had among the audience, the show received 13 nominations at the Emmy Awards and won 8 statuettes: outstanding lead actress,

outstanding directing (Morano's pilot episode "Offred"), outstanding drama series, outstanding supporting actress (Ann Dowd), outstanding writing (Bruce Miller), outstanding production design, outstanding cinematography (Colin Wilkinson) and outstanding guest actress (Alexis Bledel). On January 2018, the show also won the Golden Globe for Best Television Series-Drama and Best Actress for Elisabeth Moss.

When the TV show was ordered in 2016, Trump was the front runner for the Republican nomination. From the very beginning, Trump has never tried to conceal his misogynistic and almost racist sentiments from the whole world. At the first Republican contenders' debate in August 2015, hosted by the journalist Megyn Kelly, he sparred with her, and he later called her "bimbo" on twitter. This is only one of the numerous instances of Trump's misogyny, such as when he publicly called Rosie O' Donnell "disgusting", Angelina Jolie "ugly", a female journalist "dog", 1996 Miss Universe "Miss Piggy" and "Miss Housekeeping"; when he insulted Arianna Huffington criticizing her looks and defining her "unattractive"; when during the tv program *The Apprentice* he asked men to rate other women; and when he called women "beautiful pieces of ass". (Cohen, 2017). Trump has been widely called out for his tendency to objectify women.

Women are not Trump's only target. On several occasions, Trump has also belittled people coming from other country or belonging to other ethnic groups: when he decried the migration of citizens coming from "shithole countries", when he referred to some Mexican immigrants as "rapists" only because Mexican, and when, last year, he shared three videos with anti-muslim content on twitter, for instance. When he was only a candidate, Trump claimed that he would consider surveillance of mosques and that he would shut some of them down. During the campaign trail in 2015, he asserted that there was the need to stop the migration of Muslims. Trump's travel ban was an unconstitutional religious text that violated the first amendment's freedom of religion by suspending the entry of Muslims coming from Iran, Chad, Lybia, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Yemen and Venezuela in the United States for 90 days, since it would threaten its security (Simon, 2018). Since such values and opinions are expressed by one of the most powerful leaders in the world, fear, especially among women's rights activists and foreigner communities within the United States, is inevitable.

Notwithstanding all this, in 2017 Trump became the 45th President of the United States. On the one hand, the election of Trump dismayed many viewers and also the stars of the show itself, but at the same time some Twitter users accused the show to be

leftist propaganda specifically aimed at Trump. Actually, not only was the book written 30 years ago, but also, Hulu began to project the show before Trump was even a presidential nominee. Atwood has claimed that she could not predict Trump presidency, but at the same time she also did not stop considering his election a possibility (Bradley, 2017). Now that the nightmare for some (or the dream, for many others) has become true, just as the book in the 1980s, the tv show offers several messages for the audience, one of them being to stay awake and pay attention.

When the book first came out in 1985, it was hailed as a warning for the world: all the things portrayed in the narrative had occurred or were occurring somewhere in the world. Likewise, during its early marketing, even the TV adaptation seemed to be a cautionary tale. However, on November 9, 2016 *The Handmaid's Tale* “became a harrowing picture of a society that suddenly felt terrifyingly close to home” (Bradley, 2017), especially for women.

Apart from Trump's inappropriate comments on women, actually, hard-won women's rights are seriously being threatened in 2010s United States, as Elisabeth Moss, playing Offred in the tv show, has pointed out: “now there are actual things happening with women's reproductive rights in our own country that make me feel like this book is bleeding over into reality” (Reilly, 2017).

Last year, Republican representative Justin Humphrey introduced a bill in Oklahoma's legislature that obliged pregnant women to provide the identity of the father and to obtain his written permission before undergoing the operation. The Republican member of the Texas House of Representatives, Tony Tinderholt introduced a bill that made abortion (at any stage) a criminal offence in Texas, even though the child was conceived through rape or incest, asserting that women don't care to be personally responsible, since they know that they can have an abortion if they need it. In Arkansas the father of the child has the power to prevent the mother from having an abortion, even in cases of rape. With the Unborn Child Protection From Dismemberment Abortion Act most second trimester abortions have been banned, and also, fathers can sue doctors who perform abortions for civil damages or obtain an injunction to block the abortion.

In January the Vice President Mike Pence attended the anti-abortion March For Life, and Trump fully supported his participation (Sharman, 2017). At the end of March, Pence voted in the Senate to allow States deny grants to Planned Parenthood, the biggest provider of abortions in the United States, and on April Trump signed the Bill into law.

Nothing so distant from Gileadean policies that have completely banned abortion.

United States citizens do not need imagination anymore, since they are actually witnessing the way in which United States deals with motherhood and fertility, as if they were a punishment rather than a gift and a power. Gilead has become a graspable place. Ironically, the depiction of such a society seemed highly improbable and even silly when the book came out in the 1980s, but today this improbability has faded.

Fortunately, the show is also becoming a model for protesters across the country. The red robes and white bonnets worn by the Handmaids in the narrative have become the standard attire for women's rights activists, who have repeatedly appeared at demonstrations against gender discrimination and the infringement of civil and reproductive rights, thus turning cosplay into a political act. The crimson uniform and the white cap have become the symbol of patriarchal repression and of women's opposition to it and of their solidarity and collaboration on rights issues.

Last year, a group of activists dressed as Handmaids marched on the Capitol building in Washington to protest the GOP's health care bill. The bill aimed to defund Planned Parenthood, a nonprofit organization that provides a variety of reproductive health services, including abortion and sexual education, thus taking away access to health care from women in certain areas, and leaving them uninsured. Protesters did not stand and scream, rather, they stayed silent with their heads bowed, a posture conveying oppression. In Ohio, women dressed in red robes attended a hearing to protest a bill that would ban the dilation and evacuation procedures, the most common abortion method. Also in this case they sat still and silently. Elaina Ramsey, the executive director, has noted that while the protesters were sitting there, nobody asked them to leave but they continued with their proceedings. Protesters were invisible. This actually tells so much about how women are disregarded in conversations in which men legislate women's bodies.

In New Hampshire, protesters appeared in front of the Legislative Office Building in Concord asking to expel the Republican State Representative because of his involvement in a misogynistic forum. In Texas women dressed as Handmaids protested against restrictive abortion laws. And again, a group of women wearing the red costume marched on the Missouri's State Capitol, while lawmakers were discussing about a provision that would infringe on reproductive rights; a woman in costume participated in a March for Truth rally in Washington calling for an investigation into

possible connection between Russia and Trump's campaign and 2016 election; and in Albany the League of women Voters demonstrated in favour of improved reproductive health and contraceptive care acts (Hauser, 2017). Interestingly, last year the executive director of Action Together New Hampshire Emily Morgan founded the political action group Handmaid Coalition, set up a website by the same name and began reaching out to other groups. With its simple slogan “Fight to keep fiction from becoming reality”, Handmaid Coalition was created to fight against misogyny and also against the oppression undergone by other marginalized groups. As Andrew Liptak explains:

the site serves as a guide for prospective organizers, while the organization's Facebook page highlights its members in costume at various protests, as well as various efforts to introduce anti-abortion legislation. The site also hosts a manual called *The Handmaid's Guide*, which offers tips on making the costumes and organizing participants, plus information on protestors' rights (2017).

As a result of these activists' efforts always more Handmaids have joined the coalition which has recently grown larger with almost 700 members. Morgan has said that apart from their symbolic function the costumes help to protect activists' identities, and through the uniformity of the costumes the group appears as a unified image.

Obviously, the United States are “far from descending into Gilead-levels of injustice” (Brooks, 2017), but actually with all the laws threatening women's rights and more generally civil liberties which have been passed, these activists see that the future imagined by Atwood 30 years ago is not so unrealistic, and they're rightly afraid: certain changes do not happen overnight, rather they happen very slowly, and when people realize that they are effective it is too late.

5.2. *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Environment

Margaret Atwood spent several periods of time during her early life living in the Canadian wilderness. Her father was a forest entomologist and every summer he took his family to the bush of Ontario or Quebec to carry out his researches, while his children and wife established in a tent or in a log cabin. Both her parents instilled a

lasting passion for outdoors and nature in Margaret since her childhood, thus paving the way for her future environmental activism. There were two other periods when Atwood lived among wilderness, the most significant one being at Camp White Pine in Haliburton, where she spent three summers as a camp counselor in the 1950s. The second time was in the early 1970s when Atwood and her partner Graeme Gibson bought a farm in Alliston, Ontario, living completely isolated from civilization and technology, where she wrote many poems concerning their rural life. All these experiences together with Atwood's own feeling that the natural environment was being threatened provide an explanation for her connection to nature and consequently her activism, involving speeches and articles through which she speaks out about climate change and its consequences and against pollution.

Even though they are not preponderant within Offred's narrative, ecological concerns are fundamental in the dystopian world portrayed by Atwood, since “unspecified destructive events have produced toxic pollution that causes a decline in the birth rate” and as a consequence, “this decline provides one rationale for the sexual enslavement of fertile women by the misogynistic regime that has wiped out the government of the United States” (Stein, 2012: 316), namely the theocratic Republic of Gilead.

As Karen Stein has pointed out, Atwood wants to warn her readers that a disrespect for the environment we live in may lead to “catastrophic political and environmental upheavals” (2012: 313), in the hope that they would practice more ecofriendly behaviors, thus preventing ecological disasters. And indeed, in *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood proves to be aware of what human beings are capable of in order to grow richer, showing what the outcomes of such behaviors may be, As Offred describes:

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 ypur 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. Maybe a vulture would die of eating you. Maybe you light up in the dark, like an old-fashioned watch. Death-watch. (Atwood, 1996: 122).

As far as environmental issues are concerned, there is no better historical moment to premiere such a TV show which alludes to the ecological disaster that partly has led to Gilead. For instance, the show mentions the Colonies, toxic wastelands where Unwomen are sent to work and eventually to die from the radioactive waste. Of course, radioactivity echoes current nuclear anxieties, from the Cold War to recent nuclear accidents, the most famous being: Three Mile Island was the site of a nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania, and in 1979, several mechanical and human errors caused the worst nuclear accident in United States history that released radioactive gasses in the atmosphere; Chernobyl disaster in 1986 is surely the most famous nuclear accident ever occurred in the history of nuclear power which released a large amounts of radioactive material into the atmosphere and caused many people to contract radiation sickness, and to die later; and the most recent nuclear disaster and the second worst nuclear accident in the history of nuclear power, is the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident that occurred in 2011 in Japan.

Actually, especially in the 2010s, climate change and all the issues related to it, such as global warming, extreme weather, the melting of mountain glaciers, the retreat of polar ice, the increase of global sea levels of 3 mm per year, the extinction of too many species of animals because of human's action and pollution are a reality that humankind cannot avoid anymore. According to certain researches carried out by scientists, pollution kills at least 9 million of people (not to mention animals), numerous are the deaths attributed to diseases caused by pollution, especially in poorer countries. “The US and Japan are in the top 10 for deaths from 'modern' forms of pollution, ie fossil fuel-related air pollution and chemical pollution” explains Damian Carrington (2017).

And again, it is inevitable to mention Trump and his announcement of the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris agreement on climate change in 2017 (which he called a “hoax”), thus making significant inroads into the environmental protection: indeed the United States is the second biggest polluter after China.. The President explained that he wanted to find a new and fairer deal that would not disadvantage the United States, since, as he has claimed, the deal would damage the United States coal industry and therefore its workers. Only recently, Trump has announced that the United States could go back into the Paris climate deal, and that it is open to renegotiate the deal. However, the real problem now is understanding what Trump means by the term “renegotiation”, and what it implies.

Surely, pollution is one the biggest challenges for humankind, and both the book and

especially the 2017 TV adaptation should ring alarm bells in humanity's conscience, exactly what Atwood hoped, and still hopes, for.

5.3. The TV Adaptation

Bruce Miller is a big fan of Margaret Atwood's dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*, thus when he heard that Hulu and MGM decided to adapt the book for television he immediately applied for the job. As he has always thought, *The Handmaid's Tale* is an incredibly rich world to be explored, a world in which readers are not entirely allowed to enter due to Offred's limited perspective. And indeed, if the authors of the show have (more or less) faithfully followed the main plot, there are some interesting aspects and stories, only hinted at in the book, that are further developed in the series. Just as in the book, the story is set in the future, but while in the book Offred's past before the coup corresponds to the 1980s, in the tv show it corresponds to the 2010s. The story has indeed been updated to fit the times: there are references to Uber and Tinder for instance.

Phoebe Reilly has explained that many of the scenes of the tv show were shot around the time when Trump made the infamous declaration that men of a certain status were allowed to sexually assault women. Bruce Miller and all his collaborators discussed a lot about Trump's statements on women, and thus, also about Serena Joy's genesis. And indeed, in the show they explore Serena Joy's relationship with the Commander and her political role before the coup more in detail, pointing out that probably she would have been among the 53% of white women who voted for Trump, despite his attitude to denigrate women (2017).

Miller admitted that unconsciously, the Presidential election influenced some revisions of what he had written hitherto. For instance he had one character saying something very similar to 'Make America Great Again'. Even though it was unintentional, he decided to cut it “because it felt like it was a dig directly at one person's campaign for president” (Vineyard, 2017).

Conversely to the book, in the show Offred is more political active. In the book, Offred prefers survival to resistance, and indeed when she has already become a slave of Gilead, she refuses to join the Mayday. In the show, she risks her life and asks the Commander to return to Jezebel's, since she has been asked by the Mayday to secretly retrieve a package from the bar. Resigned to her faith, Moira initially refuses to help her,

but later Offred is given the package by a butcher, sent by Moira, that she hides in the household.

The show also explores Gilead's international relations with foreigner countries, in this case Mexico, thus offering us the possibility to see how the world outside Gilead is. Several Mexican delegates visit Gilead because they want to know what the effects of the Gileadean regime on society are. The truth is that these Mexican diplomats are interested in establishing trade relations with Gilead, that is, they want Gilead's fertile women. When the female head of the delegation questions Offred about her own experience, she initially lies saying that she is happy. But the next day, when the delegates visit the Commander's household as they are about to leave the country, Offred courageously tells the woman the truth about the Handmaids, that they are imprisoned and raped, and she pleads their help, but in response, the Mexican delegate simply explains that her country is dying because of a decline of the birth rate, and her hometown has not had a birth in six years. With this episode, not only does Offred prove to be brave and willing to do something in order to change the system, but we also see that probably, almost the whole world is in a dire situation, and other countries as well would do anything to save their own people.

In the final episode, when all the Handmaids are asked to execute Janine, the new Ofglen is the first to protest, but Offred is the first to drop the stone, followed by the other Handmaids, thus becoming a symbol of resistance. Also, before becoming a Handmaid, when she is fired and discovers that her bank account has been confiscated, Offred takes to the streets and join other women to protest. Director Morano filmed this scene on October 2016, about three months before one million people marched on Washington and many other people marched on other cities, to protest against Trump on the very first day of his administration, and in defence of human rights. When they heard about the Women's March, Morano and her collaborators were absolutely astonished. They could not believe that what they only imagined and filmed on set actually happened in real life only a few months later.

The most crucial difference is the inclusion of people of colour in the tv show. Classified as “Children of Ham”, African American have been completely banned from the racist society described in the book. In her article for *Rolling Stones*, Phoeby Reilly reported Miller's significant statement: “On TV, if all you see is an all-white world, what's the difference between making a show that's about racists and making a racist

show?” (2017). Miller did not want to create an all-white world, thus he decided to insert also some black characters: Offred's husband, Offred's friend and fellow Handmaid Moira, and her daughter Hannah.

As Noah Berlatsky has pointed out, “in some ways, the use of black actors effectively addresses the narrative's debt to African-American history” (2017). In the show there are several scenes that take us back to black Americans' history. In the first episode, Hannah's abduction recalls the abduction of black children who were sold as slaves; the scene of Luke crossing the Canadian border recalls the time when escaped slaves took refuge in Canada; and the moment when Moira is forced to prostitute herself at Jezebel's recalls the rape and the violence which female slaves had to undergo. All these references are more powerful since in the show these characters are played by black actors.

However, it must be noted that although there are black characters in the world of the series, neither the history of American slavery nor of black oppression are mentioned. There are black characters but it is as if they were not there. The Gilead portrayed by Bruce Miller is “post-racial and ahistorical” (Berlatsky, 2017), as if the United States had never been a racist country. In one scene of the series, the Commander calls Moira a “degenerate”, but only because he understands that she is lesbian, not because she is black. In the show there is no reference to racial prejudice, and no one references race. Gilead seems to be less racist than the United States actually are. Apart from slavery, it is worth mentioning Jim Crow laws: issued in the 1876, these laws legalized racial segregation in the southern states until 1968 and black people who opposed them were suppressed through violence and even death; or the infamous Ku Klux Klan, a racist movement founded in 1865 and still active in the United States, that advocates white race supremacy and nationalism.

If Moira is a lesbian also in the book, Ofglen is not. Bruce Miller has invented a new fundamental LGBT character giving a new identity to Ofglen. Thus, through a character such Ofglen the series shows the difficulties and the suffering LGBT people suffer under a conservative totalitarian regime (and not only under dictatorships unfortunately), and draws its audience's attention to the issue of female genital mutilation.

Just as in the book, Moira is one of the rebellious characters in the show. While in the book she stops fighting and she surrenders her body to Gilead, in the final episode of

the show Moira escapes from Jezebel's and finally reaches Canada where she reunites with Luke. Conversely to many other women and as other lesbian women, when she is fired and her money is frozen, she has no male partner she can rely on.

While the book does not tell us anything about Ofglen's past, on screen, before the coup, she was Emily, an academic who also had a wife and a child. Mentioning gay marriage is surely particularly significant nowadays, since it is one of the main subjects of debate. Also, it is a hard-won right that must not be taken for granted and can be easily lost, as Gilead shows. In the book Ofglen commits suicide as soon as the regime discovers her collaboration with the resistance to protect the other members. In the show, Ofglen does not disappear because of her affiliation to the Mayday, but because of gender treachery. The regime discovers that she has an illicit affair with the Martha that works in her Commander's household. While the Martha is hanged as she watches horrified, Ofglen is first told in a courtroom that her existence is an “abomination”, and since she is fertile, the court spares her life, but she has to be punished anyway. Thus, she undergoes a clitoridectomy. As Miller has explained in an interview with the *The New York Times*: “What happens to Ofglen was probably the biggest point of contention and something that had never, as far as we could tell, been depicted on television in exactly that way” (Vineyard, 2017). This disturbing scene refers to two different issues. On the one hand, the programme makers consulted the United Nations over the importance of highlighting female genital mutilation; the other allusion is to gay conversion therapy, a practice that aims to change individuals' sexual orientation, from homosexual or bisexual to heterosexual, which is still not illegal in Britain (Nicholson, 2017).

It is inevitable to mention the current situation of Chechnya and the persecution of gay men. Here the government denies the existence of gay men. Hundreds of men are illegally arrested and detained in secret prisons, brutally tortured and eventually killed only because they are homosexual. The situation for homosexuals under the Islamic State is not so different. Being gay means death. They are tortured and killed. They are hurled off a building and if the victim does not die after that, people stone him to death. When Isis kills gay people, many people are happy because they think that gays are evil. Gays are not safe at home either, since even the family beat them up and discriminate them.

Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale is more than a simple narrative about the predicament of a young woman and of all the other characters who affect her life. Every story, every aspect of this nightmarish society mirrors our past and current world. Not much has changed since the book was written and published in the 1980s: religious fundamentalism, racism and the destruction of the environment due to human's greed continue to be a scourge even of the 21st-century, just as women, homosexuals and black people are still fighting against discrimination.

The aim of dystopia is to make readers reflect upon the historical context they live in, and Atwood has succeeded. The book voluntarily shocks, but after a careful reading we cannot but realize that what is actually shocking us is the real world outside the pages of the book. *The Handmaid's Tale* functions as a shock treatment which wants to awaken people's conscience, in the hope of effecting change. Not only has Atwood researched contemporary history, drawing inspiration from news articles, or any type of essay dealing with contemporary issues, but she has also read up about United States' Puritan past and the way in which it continues to affect the United States.

Through *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood also investigates the dynamics and the functioning of power politics, of human relationships and of totalitarian states. Inspired by Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and therefore by all the infamous dictatorships of the 20th century, Gilead is a regime which classifies its citizens into social classes according to their functions, exploits means of terror such as tortures, secret police, public executions and rituals to maintain social order, and altering the structure of language, it manipulates truth in order to control individuals' minds, so that they would not formulate rebellious thoughts.

In the very moment when we think that “something terrible” could never occur to us and therefore we do not worry about that issue, we unconsciously contribute to the realization of that “something terrible”. Offred is the clear paradigm of this mechanism, and surely this is Atwood's personal way to warn us all. Before Gilead, Offred does not care about her mother's feminist battles, she even finds her mother's protests and tales annoying, because she lives in a period when women have gained a certain independence. But just as in real life, that independence has been won because there have been women willing to fight for their rights. As soon as Gilead becomes a reality,

Offred finally understands her mother and the meaning of her activism. But at that point, it is too late. Nothing must be taken for granted. Just as hard-won rights may vanish overnight, so totalitarian regimes can establish without even noticing that something is actually changing. Of course I am not only speaking about human rights, but also about the environment, one of the main issues Margaret Atwood (and I) has at heart. If the situation was grave in the 1980s, now in the 2010s is even graver, especially due to climate change.

Possibly, this is one of the most significant message that this dystopia is sending its readers: to always pay attention. Unfortunately, the great success of the 2017 TV show is demonstrating that issues which worried Atwood in the 1980s are still a source of worry for the 2010s world. In this almost post-apocalyptic scenario where the Earth is seriously polluted, Gilead is a racist theocracy that despises homosexuals and black people, and, more generally, everyone who does not conform to Puritanism, and confines women to the domestic sphere. Even though, overall, the condition of these people has improved, often discrimination continues to knock at their door. And the Earth continues to slowly die because of pollution, day after day. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* was written as a mirror of 1980s conservative America, it can be easily seen also as mirrors of 2010s America which has elected a president such as the Republican Donald Trump, often insulting women, immigrants and who is not a great lover of the environment.

But fortunately, Atwood's dystopia is partly fulfilling its role as a wake-up call. *The Handmaid's Tale* is currently having a great impact on society and on activism. Starting from 2017, hundreds of women have decided to wear the Handmaids' white bonnet and red garment in order to protest against Trump's pro-life conservative administration and all its policies suppressing most of women's rights, especially reproductive rights.

Undoubtedly, *The Handmaid's Tale* is the written proof of the greatness of Margaret Atwood not only as a writer but also as a 20th-century thinker. As a great writer, she has created a wonderful literary piece of art, employing many of the techniques typical of postmodern literature and many others typical of gothic literature, thus mixing different literary genres very successfully. But even more significantly, she has given voice to a woman, or, as Atwood prefer to call her first, to a human being who is an alienated and marginalized member of society living at the edge of history. Offred is a symbol of all those categories of society that have always been unjustly silenced, and continue to be silenced and discriminated even nowadays.

Offred is not a classical heroine, she is not a rebel, she does not challenge the government, she acts very little. The decision to create such a character as the protagonist is not casual however. Of course, extraordinary people exist, but to some degree, most of us are Offred. After all, self preservation is intrinsic to human nature, so that we would all prefer survival to rebellion. Thus, this stratagem allows us common readers to identify more easily with her and therefore to better understand her point of view.

The act of giving voice to a common individual has another meaning. Atwood also challenges traditional historiography which mainly belongs to the leading figures of history, those who actually hold the power. She reflects upon the difficulties of valuing sources and of reconstructing history. But at the same time she reflects upon the misinterpretation of sources. Offred just wants to narrate her story in the hope that one day there would be someone finally listening to her, finally noticing her existence as an individual, someone who would recognize that she is more than a property of Fred, a woman with her own identity. In a world where women are not allowed to think, to write, to read and to express their opinions, Offred's narrative is her small act of resistance. A simple act such as narrating becomes a way to somehow oppose the strictness imposed by the system. This is why her narrative is so meaningful, because it speaks on behalf of all those oppressed minorities. However, the historians of the future fail to understand. They classify her narrative as useless since it lacks historically significant details, and they inevitably silence Offred and all those people she represents once again. If it is true that Gilead has been destroyed and that it has become a subject of research, it is also true that its values and beliefs keep surviving. Gilead and what it represents can be seen as a clear metaphor for the history of humanity, which always features the same situations, dynamics and behaviours.

Through her narrative, Atwood proves to be also a great feminist thinker and defender of human rights, who has recently contested current feminist ideas and has been therefore widely (and unjustly) criticized for it. Her vision of feminism supports gender equality, and challenges the classic idea of woman as a naive being incapable of erring and of harming other people. After a first reading, *The Handmaid's Tale* seems a feminist novel, and to some extent it is, since it denounces the mistreatment and discrimination often undergone by women. But after a careful analysis, we notice how Atwood uses her narrative also to criticize the feminist movement of the second half of the 20th century and its utopia of creating a women's society, showing what it would be

like. In her dystopic society, it is women who are responsible for the indoctrination of other women, and who even torture them when necessary. If it is true that women tend to be submitted since they are often considered inferior, it is also true that they can be cruel being. Because they are human beings capable of committing atrocities just as men are, as Atwood always points out. Feminists wanted to ban pornography, and so Gilead does; they also wished that women could walk down the streets without men harming or harassing them, and Gilead makes streets safer, granting women negative freedom and protecting them, but depriving them of the freedom to act upon their free will.

In this sense, Atwood's novel is the further proof of how the concepts of utopia and dystopia are deeply intertwined: "Better never means better for everyone" (Atwood, 1996: 222), as Commander Fred points out. The utopia of the second wave feminism comes partly true with Gilead, but we see how it is not so idyllic how those feminists imagined, rather it becomes a nightmare for the majority of American women.

It seems to me, that the original essence of a feminism which aimed at gender equality is vanishing and a feminism which advocates women's radical alterity is gaining always more ground. After thirty years, Atwood continues to support her vision of feminism, as in the case of the #MeToo movement and the recent scandal involving her colleague Steven Galloway. Galloway has simply been one of the many victims of a broken legal system which first of all, does not listen to women asking for help and more protection. And perhaps, the #MeToo movement is a consequence of this lack of justice. Too many times when we watch the news we hear of women who have been murdered by their ex-husbands or ex-lovers even though they had previously denounced them and had informed the authorities, since those men continued to threaten them. Thus, it is inevitable that many women have decided to "take the law into their own hands" in a sense . But unfortunately, this has lead to a wrong mechanism in which women are the harmless and weak victims and men are the violent molesters or rapists, so that everytime that a woman publicly denounces a man, that man is automatically guilty. Sometimes those men are actually culprits, but often innocent men's name is dragged through the mire only because of false accusations on social networks, even before that a just process takes place.

For a long time, feminists have striven to grant women indipendence and civil rights, because, despite what society has always made us believe, they are equal to men from every point of view, and there must not be prearranged roles to fulfil. And

therefore, just as they deserve equal rights, thus, both men and women deserve the right to fundamental justice, but recently this right is missing. As Atwood has rightly observed, if women were perfect being always right, we would not need a legal system.

It is regrettable that Margaret Atwood has been so ferociously accused of not being a true feminist, almost a traitor of the feminist cause, only because she refuses to defend women when they are wrong and wants to obtain justice for innocent people. Probably, these accusers are those same women who have welcomed with great enthusiasm the show *The Handmaid's Tale* and the various significant messages that it tries to spread.

Bruce Miller and Reed Morano have successfully adapted the novel for the screen, precisely because, in the Canadian author's book they recognized a narrative which could also fit our historical era. But apart from the book, it is especially Margaret Atwood who was a heroine in the 1980s and is still a heroine in the 2010s, not only thanks to her artistic work, but also as an intellectual and activist. And at the moment the world needs Margaret Atwood, in the hope that one day future generations will read *The Handmaid's Tale* and see the world it refers to as a distant age which could never occur again.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andriano, J. (2010) "The Handmaid's Tale as Scrabble Game", in *Critical Insights: 'The Handmaid's tale', by Margaret Atwood*, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 276-284.

Appleton, S. (2012) "Freed from the Salt Mines of Virtue: Wicked Women in Margaret Atwood's Novels", in *Critical Insights: Margaret Atwood*, Bouson, J. B., Ipswich, Mass. : Salem press, a division of EBSCO publishing, pp 276-281.

Atwood, M. (2018) "Am I a Bad Feminist?", *The Globe and Mail*, 13 January [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/am-i-a-bad-feminist/article37591823/> (Accessed: 30 April 2018)

Atwood, M. (1996) *The Handmaid's Tale*, London: Vintage.

Atwood, M. (2011) "Margaret Atwood: The Road to Utopia", *The Guardian*, 14 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-utopia> (Accessed: 25 January 2018).

Atwood, M. (2005) "Writing Utopia", in *Writing With Intent*, Atwood, M., New York, NY; Carroll & Graf Publishers, an imprint of Avalon Publishing Group Inc, pp 92-100.

Banerjee, C. (2010) "Alice in Disneyland: Criticism as Commodity in *The Handmaid's Tale*", in *Critical Insights: 'The Handmaid's tale', by Margaret Atwood*, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 153-174.

Basler, B. (1979) "5,000 Join Feminist Group's Rally in Times Sq. Against Pornography", *The New York Times*, 21 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/10/21/archives/5000-join-feminist-groups-rally-in-times-sq-against-pornography.html> (Accessed: 11 April 2018).

Berlatsky, N. (2017) "Both Versions of *The Handmaid's Tale* Have a Problem With Racial Erasure", *The Verge*, 15 June [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2017/6/15/15808530/handmaids-tale-hulu-margaret-atwood-black-history-racial-erasure> (Accessed 16 April 2018).

Bolton, M. J. (2010) "This Is the Way the World Ends': Margaret Atwood and the Dystopian Impulse", in *Critical Insights: 'The Handmaid's tale', by Margaret Atwood*, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 59-73.

Booker, M. K. (2013) "Compare/Contrast: Media Culture, Conformism, and Commodification in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and M. T. Anderson's *Feed*", in *Critical Insights: Dystopia*, Brooker, M. K., Ipswich, Mass. : Salem press a division of EBSCO publishing, pp 73-87.

Bradbury, R. (2017) *Fahrenheit 451*, Milano: Mondadori Libri S.p.A.

Bradley, L. (2017) "Margaret Atwood's Guide to Resistance in the Age of Trump", *Vanity Fair*, 26 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/04/handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood-interview-donald-trump> (Accessed: 27 April 2018).

Brooks, K. (2017) "The Lasting Impact of *Handmaid's Tale* Is the Activism It's Inspired", *The Huffington Post*, 27 June [Online]. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-lasting-impact-of-handmaids-tale-is-the-activism-its-inspired_us_594011b5e4b0b13f2c6e36a6 (Accessed: 27 April 2018).

Burns, T. (2013) "Science, Politics, and Utopia in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*", in *Critical Insights: Dystopia*, Brooker, M. K., Ipswich, Mass. : Salem press a division of EBSCO publishing, pp 91-124.

Carrington, D. (2017) "Global Pollution Kills 9m a Year and Threatens 'Survival of Human Societies'", *The Guardian*, 20 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/19/global-pollution-kills-millions-threatens-survival-human-societies> (Accessed: 27 April 2018).

Cohen, C. (2017) "Donald Trump sexism tracker: Every offensive comment in one place", *The Telegraph*, 14 July [Online]. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/donald-trump-sexism-tracker-every-offensive-comment-in-one-place/> (Accessed: 27 April 2018)

D'Ancona, M. (2017) "The Handmaid's Tale Held a Mirror up to a Year of Trump", *The Guardian*, 26 December [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/26/the-handmaids-tale-year-trump-misogyny-metoo> (Accessed: 27 April 2018).

Debnath, N. (2017) "The Handmaid's Tale: What are the Real-Life Influences and Parallels of the TV Show?", *Daily Express*, 25 June [Online]. Available at: <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/821142/The-Handmaids-Tale-Trump-Margaret-Atwood-abortion-feminism-ISIS> (Accessed: 27 April 2018)

Dodson, D. J. (2010) "We Lived in the Blank White Spaces': Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", in *Critical Insights: The*

Handmaid's tale', by Margaret Atwood, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 196-223.

Dunn, J. E., (2010) "Feminism and *The Handmaid's Tale*" in *Critical Insights: 'The Handmaid's tale'*, by Margaret Atwood, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 74-88.

Gibson, S. (2017) "Why Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* is so Relevant in the Trump Era & What It Can Teach Us", *Highsnobiety*, 27 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.highsnobiety.com/2017/04/27/the-handmaids-tale-trump/> (Accessed: 27 April 2018)

Ginzburg, C. (2009) *Il Formaggio e i Vermi*, Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore s.p.a.

Grace, D. (2010) "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Critical Reception", in *Critical Insights: 'The Handmaid's tale'*, by Margaret Atwood, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 42-58.

Grady, C. (2018) "Why *Handmaid's Tale* Author Margaret Atwood Is Facing #MeToo Backlash", *Vox*, 17 January [Online]. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/1/17/16897404/margaret-atwood-metoo-backlash-steven-galloway-ubc-accountable> (Accessed: 30 April 2018)

Hauser, C. (2017) "A Handmaid's Tale of protest", *The New York Times*, 30 June [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/us/handmaids-protests-abortion.html> (Accessed: 19 April 2018)

Hawkes, R. (2017) "The horrors of *The Handmaid's Tale* aren't just fiction: many of them have already happened", *The Telegraph*, 28 May [Online]. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/0/horrors-handmaids-tale-arent-just-fiction-many-have-already/> (Accessed: 13 February 2018).

Howells, C. A. (2010) "*The Handmaid's Tale*", in *Critical Insights: 'The Handmaid's tale'*, by Margaret Atwood, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 91-111.

Humm, M. (1992) *Feminisms: a reader*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Huxley, A. (2012) *Il Mondo Nuovo/ Ritorno al Mondo Nuovo*, Milano: Mondadori Libri S.p.A.

Jadwin, L. (2010) "Margaret Atwood' *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985): Cultural and Historical Context", in *Critical Insights: 'The Handmaid's tale'*, by Margaret Atwood, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 21-41.

Kassam, A. (2018) "Margaret Atwood Faces Feminist Backlash on Social Media Over #MeToo", *The Guardian*, 15 January [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/15/margaret-atwood-feminist-backlash-metoo> (Accessed: 30 April 2018)

Khomami, N. (2017) "#MeToo: How a Hashtag Became a Rallying Cry Against Sexual Harassment", *The Guardian*, 20 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/women-worldwide-use-hashtag-metoo-against-sexual-harassment> (Accessed: 30 April 2018).

Klaic, D. (1991) *The plot of the future : utopia and dystopia in modern drama*. The University of Michigan press.

Kumar, K. (1987) *Utopia and anti-utopia in modern times*. Oxford ; New York : Blackwell.

Liptak, A. (2017) "How *The Handmaid's Tale* Inspired a Protest Movement", *The Verge*, 31 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2017/10/31/15799882/handmaids-tale-costumes-cosplay-protest> (Accessed 16 April 2018).

McGiveron, R. O. (2013) "'They Got Me a Long Time Ago': The Sympathetic Villain in Nineteen Eighty-Four, Brave New World, and Fahrenheit 451", in *Critical Insights: Dystopia*, Brooker, M. K., Ipswich, Mass. : Salem press a division of EBSCO publishing, pp 125-141.

Miner, M. (2010) "'Trust Me': Reading the Plot in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", in *Critical Insights: 'The Handmaid's tale', by Margaret Atwood*, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 112-137.

Mohr, D. M. (2005) *Worlds apart? : dualism and transgression in contemporary female dystopias*. Jefferson, NC ; London : McFarland & Co.

Murphy, M. P. (2012) "Hanging (onto) Words: Language, Religion, and Spirituality in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", in *Critical Insights: Margaret Atwood*, Bouson, J. B., Ipswich, Mass. : Salem press, a division of EBSCO publishing, pp 230-253.

Murray, J. (2011) "20th Century Britain: The Woman's Hour", *BBC*, 3 March [online]. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/jmurray_01.shtml (Accessed: 11 April 2018).

Myers, R (2013) "General History of Women's Suffrage in Britain", *Independent*, 27 May [Online]. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/newsuk/home-news/general-history-of-women-s-suffrage-in-britain-8631733.html> (Accessed: 11 April

2018)

Nathoo, Z. (2018) "Margaret Atwood Faces Backlash for #MeToo Op-ed", *CBC*, 14 January [Online]. Available at: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/atwood-op-ed-galloway-letter-1.4486936> (Accessed: 30 April 2018)

Neuman, S. (2010) "Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*", in *Critical Insights: 'The Handmaid's tale', by Margaret Atwood*, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 138-152.

Ortner, S. B. (1972). "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?", *Feminist Studies*, [Online]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177638?newaccount=true&read-now=1&seq=4#page_scan_tab_contents

Orwell, G. (2015) *1984*, Milano: Mondadori Libri S.p.A.

Rao, E. (1993) *Strategies for identity: the fiction of Margaret Atwood*, New York: Peter Lang.

Reilly, P. (2017) "How 'The Handmaid's Tale' Became TV's Most Chilling Trump-Era Series", *Rolling Stone*, 25 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/features/the-handmaids-tale-tvs-most-chilling-trump-era-series-w478718> (Accessed: 27 April 2018)

Robertson, A. (2017) "The Handmaid's Tale is a Chilling Expansion on Margaret Atwood's Novel", *The Verge*, 13 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2017/4/13/15222296/handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood-hulu-tv-series-review> (Accessed 27 April 2018)

Sampathkumar, M., Wilts, A. (2017) "Donald Trump Confirms Withdrawal From Paris Agreement on Climate Change in Huge Blow for Global Deal", *The Independent*, 1 June [Online]. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-paris-agreement-climate-change-withdrawal-latest-news-updates-global-warming-deal-a7768116.html> (Accessed: 27 April 2018)

Sampathkumar, M. (2018) "Donald Trump Says US Could 'Go Back' Into Paris Climate Agreement", *The Independent*, 10 June [Online]. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-paris-climate-deal-agreement-us-go-back-latest-a8152531.html> (Accessed: 27 April 2018)

Segalov, M. (2015) "'Being Gay in the Islamic State': Men Reveal Chilling Truth About Homosexuality Under Isis", *The Independent*, 25 August [Online]. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/being-gay-in-the-islamic-state-men-reveal-chilling-truth-about-homosexuality-under-isis-10470894.html> (Accessed:

27 April 2018)

Severgnini, C. (2016) "Dalle Suffragette agli Anni '90, Breve Storia del Movimento Femminista", *La Stampa*, 5 March [Online]. Available at:

<http://www.lastampa.it/2016/03/05/italia/dalle-suffragette-dellottocento-agli-anni-breve-storia-del-movimento-femminista-J8I1IvCbVFEjK32xTSouzJ/pagina.html> (Accessed: 11 April 2018)

Sharman, J. (2017) "Margaret Atwood Says Rise of Trump Has Made *The Handmaid's Tale* Popular Again", *The Independent*, 12 February [Online]. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-puritan-values-donald-trump-republican-party-abortion-a7575796.html> (Accessed: 27 April 2018)

Simon, D. (2018) "President Trump's Other Insensitive Comments on Race and Ethnicity", *CNN*, 14 January [Online]. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/11/politics/president-trump-racial-comments-tweets/index.html> (Accessed: 27 April 2018).

Snipp-Walmsley, C. (2006) "Postmodernism", in *Literary theory and criticism: an Oxford guide*, Waugh, P., New York: Oxford University press, pp 405-425.

-Staels, H. (1995) *Margaret Atwood's novels: a study of narrative discourse*, Tübingen: A. Franckle Verlag, pp 157-173.

Stein, K. F. (2010) "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Scheherazade in Dystopia", in *Critical Insights: 'The Handmaid's tale', by Margaret Atwood*, Bouson, J. B., Pasadena, CA ; Hackensack, NJ ; Salem press, pp 261-275.

Stein, K. (2012) "Surviving the Waterless flood: Feminism and Ecofeminism In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale, Oryx and Crake, and The Year of the Flood*", in *Critical Insights: Margaret Atwood*, Bouson, J. B., Ipswich, Mass. : Salem press, a division of EBSCO publishing, pp 313-317.

Tennant, C. G. (1991) *Margaret Atwood's transformed and trasforming Gothic*, Ann Arbor: U.M.I..

Thornburgh, D. (2013) "Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan Remade Conservatism and the West", *The Guardian*, 8 April [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-ronald-reagan> (Accessed: 9 February 2018).

Tickner, J. A. (2011) "Gender in World Politics", in *The Globalization of World Politics*, Baylis, J., Smith, S., Owens, P., New York : Oxford University press, pp 263-

Tiffany, K. (2017) "Margaret Atwood Says Hulu's Handmaid's Tale Adaptation 'Goes Farther' than the Book", *The Verge*, 9 May [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2017/3/9/14868424/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-reddit-ama> (Accessed 24 April 2018).

Vickroy, L. (2012) "Sexual Trauma, Ethics, and the Reader in the Works of Margaret Atwood", in *Critical Insights: Margaret Atwood*, Bouson, J. B., Ipswich, Mass. : Salem press, a division of EBSCO publishing, pp 254-275.

Vineyard, J. (2017) "'The Handmaid's Tale' Showrunner Bruce Miller on the Season Finale", *The New York Times*, 18 June [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/18/arts/television/the-handmaids-tale-finale-showrunner-interview.html> (Accessed: 27 April 2018)

White, C. (2017) "Dystopian Fantasy? The Handmaid's Tale Is Based Entirely on Real History", *The BBC*, 2 June [Online]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/c7bbe6fc-f452-4015-acdb-719ff8e5d389> (Accessed: 13 February 2018).