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Women disunited : Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a critique of feminism

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WOMEN DISUNITED: MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*
AS A CRITIQUE OF FEMINISM

A Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the Department of English

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by Alanna A. Callaway

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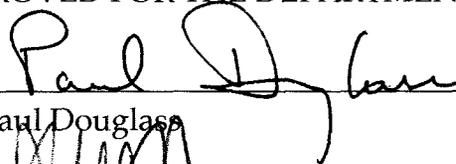
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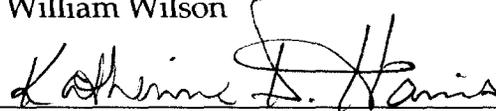
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ABSTRACT
WOMEN DISUNITED:
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*
AS A CRITIQUE OF FEMINISM

by Alanna A. Callaway

While there is plenty of traditional feminist critique of male power structures in Atwood's works, and particularly in *The Handmaid's Tale*, this thesis argues that the power structure of Gilead (the biblically-inflected nation Atwood imagines) also critiques the feminine roles that support and enable the repression of other women. Placing the novel in the contexts of Atwood's career, feminism, and dystopian literature, provides a fuller understanding of how the novel functions as an expression of the disunity of women.

Thus, this thesis turns the focus of *The Handmaid's Tale* from the consequences of patriarchal control and "traditional" misogyny, to the matriarchal network, and a new form of misogyny: women's hatred of women. Read thusly, *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes a prophetic call to action.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a prolific and versatile writer. Her literary career began in 1961 with the publication of her first poetry collection, *Double Persephone*, and has grown to include sixteen poetry collections, twelve novels, eight short fiction collections, six children's books, and five major non-fiction works. Atwood has also edited six literary anthologies including, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 1972, her most notable anthology, which has been credited with renewing interest in Canadian literature. In addition to this generic diversity, Atwood's work offers thematic diversity: Canadian national identity, relations between Canada and the United States, relations between Canada and Europe, the Canadian wilderness, environmental issues, biotechnology, human rights issues, and feminist issues, a prominent theme throughout her career. Atwood's representations of gender explore the social myths defining femininity, representations of women's bodies in art, the social and economic exploitation of women, as well as women's relations with each other and with men.

Atwood characterizes her novels in the following way: "the first trio [*The*

Edible Woman, *Surfacing*, and *Lady Oracle*] has to do with women and men, last trio [*The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, and *Robber Bride*] with women and women, and then [one] in between [*Life Before Man*] ha[s] to do with both: [...] pointing towards *Cat's Eye* and *Robber Bride* and one pointing towards *Handmaid's Tale* and *Bodily Harm*" (*Waltzing Again* 219). Atwood's first five novels, in particular, demonstrate the range and complexity of her representations of sexual power politics, and provide a solid foundation for understanding the evolution of her feminist sympathies and how they inform *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In *The Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood examines the themes of rejection of gender roles, and loss of identity. Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist, grapples with self-realization in the face of the limited options available to her as a young woman in the 1960s. She must first submit to her parents' expectations and then to her fiancé's plans. Marian fears that in marriage she will find herself completely overwhelmed by her husband's strong personality, continually submerging her desires in his own. She bakes a woman-shaped cake (an "edible woman") and offers it to her fiancé, Peter. Natalie Palumbo believes Marian "hopes to fend off her metaphorical consumption by Peter, and resolve her own ambivalence to marriage" (75). This exploration of the shortcomings of marriage as traditionally envisioned re-emerges as a theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In *Surfacing* (1972), Atwood returns to the theme of identity, this time exploring national as well as gendered identity. This narrative is filtered through the unnamed female protagonist's deteriorating mind, in which reality, memory, fairy tales, and mythology are fused. The protagonist perceives herself as completely isolated and disconnected from people around her. At the personal level, she feels alienated from those with whom she is intimately involved, particularly her lover and her best female friend. At the public level, she feels marginalized and politically dispossessed. Part of her alienation and dispossession stem from a lack of identity, which Atwood expresses by leaving her unnamed. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood again examines the importance of names, particularly the names of female characters. As Natalie Cooke observes, when compared to Marian MacAlpin, the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* may "find herself in a much stronger position as a woman of the 1970s" (68). However, the movement for women's liberation has not freed her from male-imposed pressure to marry, nor has it absolved her of the guilt she feels as a result of her abortion.

In *Lady Oracle* (1976) Atwood explores duality and multiplicity as functions of identity. The protagonist Joan Foster constructs a series of identities. This is her mechanism to secure love and acceptance, while avoiding the

consequences of her actions. Foster fails to integrate these identities and spends her life on the run, hiding her true activities from the men she is involved with. Foster is willing to stage her own death to maintain this fragmentation, thereby escaping responsibility for her actions and failed relationships. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we again see the female protagonist's struggle to reconcile conflicting identities: her socially proscribed identity and her authentic identity.

In *Life Before Man* (1979), Atwood explores gestures of resistance and survival at the individual level. Carol Ann Howells asserts that these gestures illustrate the "moral and social evolution of human beings" (67). The novel focuses on domestic relationships and how events become catalysts for change by changing the relationships themselves as well as the people within the relationships. Natalie Palumbo believes this change is really evolution, expressed as the characters cease "to hide in elaborate fantasy worlds [...] or in obsessive blaming of the past" (79).

In her fifth novel, *Bodily Harm* (1981), Atwood "scrutinizes social myths of femininity" from the point of view of a woman whose body has been "damaged by cancer and a mastectomy" (Howells 80). Rennie, the protagonist, struggles to accept her body's betrayal, "the scar on her breast splits open like a diseased fruit and something [...] crawls out" (Atwood 60). As Carol Ann Howells observes,

“Rennie’s disgust at her own damaged body inevitably affects her account of her relationships with men” (85). The sordid details of these relationships focus the narrative on sexual power politics. Thus, “Rennie is forced to see how the personal and political cannot be separated” (Howells 80).

The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood’s sixth novel, continues her explorations of gender and identity as well as domestic politics. Since its publication in 1986, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been the subject of intense critical dialog. A dystopian survival text set at the end of the twentieth century on the cusp of achieving equality between the sexes, *The Handmaid’s Tale* portrays the dissolution of the United States, resulting in what Christopher Jones rightly identifies as a “reinvigorated hatred of women and the explosive growth of religious (patriarchal) fundamentalism” (4). This hatred is realized in the colonizing force of the Republic of Gilead, a puritanical, reactionary, militaristic regime. Jones characterizes this cultural shift succinctly; “in this future, men have had it with uppity women and ‘put them back in their place’” (3). A civil war is fought in order to make women “malleable to men’s desires [...]. They must submit to their socially determined roles or be seen as ‘demons’” (Goldblatt 3). These regressive social roles are determined by a caste system defining standards for behavior, dress, and social duties, thereby eliminating undesirable cultural

trends and beliefs, while controlling a fearful and potentially rebellious populace.

Understandably, most criticism focuses on the “hyper-patriarchy” of Gilead (Jones 3). For example, David Coad’s “Hymens, Lips, and Masks: The Veil in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” examines how the veil, worn by all women in Gilead, functions as the crucial tool of subjugation, one element of the politics of dress within the novel. Debrah Raske, in her article, “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*: False Borders and Subtle Subversions,” explores the relationship between language and thought, identifying three language systems present in the novel: the Gilead system, the narrator’s system, and the academic rhetoric of the novel’s closing section. Raske examines these language systems as methods of control, and in particular, methods of controlling women. While both Coad’s and Raske’s observations are important for a complete understanding of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the true focus of Atwood’s novel lies elsewhere.

A second critical focus has been the generic aspects of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which are read in the context of a patriarchal order. In “Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias,” Ildney Cavalcanti discusses the duality of language within this genre. Cavalcanti maintains that language has

liberating potential when wielded by the female characters opposing the linguistic enforcement of the masculine power structure. This is certainly an interesting and important concept; however, Cavalcanti fails to explore how women use rhetoric to enforce oppression of other women. Margaret Daniels and Heather Bowen examine four dystopic novels from a feminist perspective in "Feminist Implications of Anti-Leisure in Dystopian Fiction." Daniels and Bowen maintain that women are denied access to leisure in these societies through the devaluation or absence of personal leisure spaces. They trace this phenomenon in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Brave New World*, *Player Piano*, and *1984*. Daniels and Bowen have astutely identified a key method of the patriarchal oppression in Gilead, though they do not examine how women deny other women access to leisure. Other examples include Lionel Shriver's "Population in Literature" and Stephanie Barber Hammer's "The World as It Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*." Shriver focuses on the treatment of population issues in modern fiction, suggesting three categories of representation: fear of decline, fear of excess, and fear of population professionals. It is useful to understand the concept of population, particularly as it informs the establishment of mothering practices within Gilead. According to Hammer, Atwood has broken into the formerly male-dominated

genre of satire and gained critical and financial success. Hammer asserts that the themes and motifs of the novel firmly embed it in the satirical tradition. Atwood chose satire as the most effective trope for critiquing the practices of Second-Wave Feminism.

A third critical focus has been feminism. Evelyn Keller Fox examines the historical relationship between science and feminism. Keller is particularly interested in the effect feminist scholarship has had on this relationship. While her article "Feminism, Science, and Postmodernism" is more of a general discussion of science and gender, Keller touches specifically on how reproduction is controlled in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Understanding this idea is key to the influence of Science Fiction and speculative fiction on the creation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Shirley Neuman's "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*" discusses an interview she conducted with Atwood after the operatic adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The main focus of this article is Atwood's feminist sympathies and tendencies.

All of these critical foci are important; however, they miss the crucial point that Gilead's power structure is an expression of the disunity of women. While Gilead's caste system represses men and women, it is the women in positions of power, rather than the men, who make this system unpleasant and dangerous for

women. This is the focus of my thesis.

First, the influence of feminism on *The Handmaid's Tale* is discussed. In tracing the development of feminism, a sustained discussion of Second-Wave Feminism is offered. Atwood's evolving feminist sympathies are also examined, mainly through published interviews of Atwood conducted between 1972 and 2005.

Second, the development of the utopian tradition is traced through texts such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. The dystopic tradition is also outlined through the following texts: Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and George Orwell's *1984*. These texts were chosen because they seem to have influenced Atwood's creation of the Republic of Gilead and because they are primarily concerned with sexual power politics.

Finally, it is posited that within *The Handmaid's Tale* the real threat in Gilead comes not from male but from female control. The ultimate result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is the evolution of a new form of misogyny, not as we usually think of it, as men's hatred of women, but as *women's* hatred of women. Atwood depicts one viable backlash from our current feminist momentum: gynocentric misogyny and "traditional" misogyny combined in one

militaristic social and religious order—the Republic of Gilead. In other words, the male- dominated power structure relies on women to regulate one another and enforce social standards. The philosophy informing the social structure is not unique to Gilead: “no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 308).

Grounding the social hierarchy in biblical and historical precedents, the patriarchy attempts to disguise the reality of this universally degrading women’s culture. For example, the new family structure relies on “the monthly rape ‘Ceremony’ [which] follows the scriptural ‘and she shall bear upon my knees,’ and grotesquely requires the presence of Wife, Handmaid, and Commander. It synthesizes the institutionalized humiliation, objectification, and ownership of women in Gilead” (Cavalcanti 166). My interpretation takes this a step further. Because of the nature of household politics, and the uniquely patriarchal content informing them, it is no longer the men, but the women who should be feared.

Placing *The Handmaid’s Tale* within the contexts of feminism and dystopian literature enables me to return to the text and reinterpret Atwood’s creation of this reactionary society as a critique of Second-Wave Feminism and a

prophetic call to action.

Chapter 2

The Handmaid's Tale and the Feminist Tradition

To understand how *The Handmaid's Tale* functions as a response to Second-Wave Feminism, it is important to discuss that movement's evolution from its early nineteenth-century roots through the 1970s. We shall see that Margaret Atwood aligns herself more with Liberal Feminism, which was inspired by First-Wave Feminism, than with the Second Wave.

The political and ideological foundations of Second-Wave Feminism reach back to the 1800s, a period noted, as Judith Hole and Ellen Levine observe in their study *The Rebirth of Feminism*, for its “geographic expansion, industrial development, growth of social reform movements, and a general intellectual ferment with a philosophical emphasis on individual freedom, the ‘rights of man’ and universal education” (2). Early advocates for women’s rights focused on suffrage because disenfranchisement was the most notable official exclusion of women. They believed that securing women’s right to vote would bring social recognition of women’s value which would lead to the moral and social improvement of the entire population.

In the course of this political struggle, feminist pioneers challenged

prevalent social assumptions. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft attempted to dispel the social myth regarding women's inherent sentimentality in her 1792 tract, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women." In "The Subjection of Women" (1869) John Stuart Mill argued against the Victorian theories of biological determinism. And, in her 1873 speech "On Women's Right to Vote," Susan B. Anthony questioned the validity of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The efforts of these three prominent feminist pioneers illustrate the humanist concern that inspired the struggle for the equality of women. In 1895 the word *feminism* was recognized as the label of the movement for the political and economic equality of the sexes. First-Wave Feminism culminated with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, after which the women's movement was virtually dormant for forty years (Hole and Levine 14).

In these forty years—from 1920, to the re-emergence of the movement in the 1960s—women's issues and concerns were rarely considered to have any larger social meaning or significance. Reflecting on this lull, Mordeca Jane Pollock, a former board member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), explains that a woman was "expected to enter into a monogamous marriage, live in a nuclear—often emotionally isolated—family, and limit her activities to domestic concerns, volunteer work, and social interests, that [were],

in the final analysis, severely circumscribed" (16). And, as Hole and Levine point out, "any discontent [women] felt was believed to have resulted from individual maladjustments" (17). However, the re-emergence of the women's movement fostered an understanding that their distinct lack of opportunities—economic, legal, and social—were in fact, according to Pollock, functions of a "psychologically enforced cultural myth, a set of assumptions and values concerning women that has been transmitted consciously and unconsciously for millennia" (16). Therefore, it became clear to Second-Wave Feminists that the deep-seated psychological roots of inequality had to be addressed to affect change, and, in order to do so, a new strategy had to be adopted.

Whereas First-Wave Feminism focused on officially mandated *de jure* inequalities, most notably disenfranchisement, Second-Wave Feminism viewed unofficial *de facto* inequalities, such as discrimination and oppression, as equally important. Proponents of Second-Wave Feminism viewed the personal as the political and were determined to help women understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized, and reflective of a sexist structure of power. In her article "Changing the Role of Women," Pollock explains that one way to achieve this goal was to reveal that "the sexist mythology exists because the relationship between male and female is a political one, a relationship of

superordinate to subordinate—and a relationship that obtains in the most intimate and personal as well as the most massive and public of our activities”

(18). Acknowledging the political dimension of women's private oppression was the genesis of the new women's movement.

Second-Wave Feminism, also known as the Women's Liberation Movement, began as what would later be called Liberal or Moderate Feminism. Championed by figures such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, Liberal Feminism attempted to reform or appropriate existing political structures to advance women's interests along a civil rights model. The publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 encouraged women to admit and acknowledge the import of their feelings of personal dissatisfaction, urging them to seek out its social sources. This signaled an important shift in the cultural perception of women, for the focus was shifted from “individual maladjustments” to the endorsed social order. Like their predecessors, Liberal Feminists argued that women deserve the same privileges, protections, pay and opportunities as men. As activist Birgitta Linner astutely noted in 1972,

despite the enlightened laws enacted early in the century to improve the status of women and create equality in marriage, those in control of the institutions of society—the politicians and many of the religious leaders—were successful in maintaining the traditional family role system and the public's adherence to it. It

was not until the 1960s that real debate, research, and reform exploded. (55)

Prior to the “explosion” Linner refers to, efforts to raise awareness had been primarily focused on the political arena.

Though the efforts of Liberal Feminists and the reception of *The Feminine Mystique* had a profound impact on the culture of the United States (Fox 1), the movement was not without its critics. The main criticism of Liberal Feminism was that it presented itself as *the* women’s movement, despite its obvious focus on the malaise of white middle-class suburban women. In short, Liberal Feminism ignored working-class and minority women, who, angered by further disenfranchisement, channeled their dissatisfaction into the formation of sub-groups as a means to further their specific causes and agendas. Of these sub-groups, the most pertinent to this discussion, as a means to understand Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, are: Cultural Feminism, Separatism, Materialist Feminism, and Radical Feminism. Each of these sub-groups adopted and advanced a different perspective in the larger cultural debate on women’s issues, an approach Feminist scholar Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner rightly characterizes as “representative of the rifts of the time” (27). Therefore, instead of participating collaboratively as part of the same overall movement, Second-Wave Feminists

often took separate, sometimes parallel, often conflicting, tracks. The result was that each sub-group was competing for authority and recognition, undermining women's solidarity. Because of this, Atwood, it would appear, was drawn to none of these Feminisms.

For Atwood, who has been a politically active advocate of human rights since the early 1960s, Cultural Feminism lacked an overt political focus or agenda. This sub-group was concerned instead with recovering cultural and artistic expressions and traditions that were uniquely female. Cultural Feminists sought to move away from representing male-dominated institutions and values in favor of elevating women's experiences and values. Professor Warren Hedges believes their central dilemma was "how to create a 'gynocentric' culture without drawing on a notion of 'universal' sisterhood that may exclude some women" (1). This gynocentric culture is predicated on the assumption that women are inherently kinder and gentler than men. Atwood criticizes this assumption in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where we see a woman's culture maintained through women's cruelty towards one another.

Separatism also fell short in Atwood's view, for it argued that the way women can best care for and/or support one another and combat patriarchy is through the creation of female-only spaces and relationships. These spaces

manifested themselves in the form of all-female banks, businesses, and social agencies, and the like. However, the creation of these female-only spaces could be problematic in that women were choosing merely to separate themselves from society instead of attempting to educate men and bring about some social reform. Therefore, Separatism fails to offer a viable alternative to the existing system, which, according to Pollock, trains men “to equate power with power *over* others, to view aggression as a valid means of problem-solving” (16, emphasis author's) thus ensuring the continuance of patriarchal systems for future generations.

Hole and Levine characterize the Separatists as women who “took a pro-woman anti-brainwashing position,” explaining that “these women rejected the traditional explanations for female behavior, agreeing with other feminists that women’s behavior is not the result of inherent psychological characteristics” (139). Furthermore, as Hole and Levine point out, Separatists believed women’s actions were the result of “continual, daily pressure from men” (140). By removing themselves from the sphere of male influence, expectation, and judgment, women could freely express their true femininity and female identity.

Another potential downfall of Separatism was its tendency to encourage resentment between the sexes. *The Handmaid’s Tale* contains hints of Atwood’s criticism of Separatism. Offred’s mother, a dedicated Second-Wave Feminist

comments: "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" (Atwood 121). This marked disdain for the male sex merely reversed the extant social attitudes, without offering solutions to the issue of gender inequalities.

Materialist Feminism had a strong foundation in class-consciousness. This branch may have been initially appealing to Atwood because of her own liberal political leanings. However, Atwood ultimately rejected the Materialist Feminist approach. Members of this branch of feminism were deeply involved with and committed to left-wing politics, and opposed capitalism in favor of socialism. They believed that the path to freedom and equality lay in the abolition of the faulty economic system whose division of labor necessarily privileged men over women, thereby relegating women to positions of inferiority. Hole and Levine point out that for Materialist Feminists, "'women's issues' [were viewed] as part of the larger struggle for socialist change" (108). Often this meant that women's issues were submerged within the drive for social, economic, and political revolution.

Radical Feminism, the branch of Second-Wave Feminism Atwood found most alarming, primarily focused on what prominent Feminist theorist bell hooks calls "the annihilation of sex roles" (143). Radical Feminists drew on

Cultural Feminism and Separatism and advocated, as Hedges points out, “nothing less than a complete revolution in terms of gendered oppression and resistance on all fronts, public and private” (2-3). Radical Feminists were concerned with the implications and effects of women’s oppression under the patriarchal social order. Radical Feminists sought to create awareness of the disparate needs of women through the identification and deeper politicization of “women’s issues,” more specifically, reproductive rights, pornography legislation, sexuality, and equality in relationships. As hooks observes in *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center*,

Fundamentally, they argued *that all men are the enemies of all women* and proposed as solutions to this problem a utopian woman nation, separatist communities, and even the subjugation or extermination of all men. Their anger may have been a catalyst for individual liberatory resistance and change. It may have encouraged bonding with other women to raise consciousness. It did not strengthen public understanding of the significance of authentic feminist movement. (34-35, emphasis author's)

hooks believes this adversarial approach reignited “the war between the sexes” (38). Hole and Levine maintain that as early as 1968 it became evident that “the new women’s movement was not going to limit itself to statements of principles or traditional actions of political protest. Targets of what radical women considered ‘sexism’ were everywhere, and susceptible to attack” (124). Atwood,

who studied in America during the late 1960s, seemed baffled by this antagonistic approach. As she commented in a 1978 interview, "I've always wondered [...] do so many women think of themselves as menaced on all sides, and of their husbands as potential murderers?" (*Waltzing Again* 44). Atwood would agree with hooks that this fear could potentially lead to a significant misunderstanding of the aims of the Women's Liberation Movement.

It would seem, then, that Atwood was opposed to the concept of the war between the sexes. While she supported social equality for women, she did not envision antagonistic behaviors or approaches as the means to achieve this. Atwood's broad humanist concerns align her more with the views of First-Wave and Moderate Feminists and make her skeptical and wary of the more radical expressions of Second-Wave Feminism.

For Atwood Second-Wave Feminism contained three central dilemmas. The first trend of Second-Wave Feminism that troubled Atwood was the lack of female solidarity. Though all Second-Wave Feminists worked to end *de facto* inequalities and, therefore, often pursued complementary purposes, they were most frequently at odds with one another. Instead of embracing the myriad issues confronting women across socio-economic lines, Second-Wave Feminists tended to advance a single agenda, issue, or cause at the expense of all others.

This resulted in resentment and distrust as well as self-segregation.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood depicts this disunity primarily through Gilead's caste system in which women are assigned a particular role and concomitant dress and duties, with no hope of ever breaking free of these roles except through prostitution, exile, or death. The Gilead takeover can be read as stemming, in part, from women's lack of solidarity in pre-Gilead culture and society. The social structure of Gilead reinforces and heightens these feelings, most disturbingly, as we shall examine in the fourth chapter, through the matriarchal regulation and enforcement of Gilead's patriarchy.

The second difficulty Second-Wave Feminism posed for Atwood was the changing definition of the word "woman," resulting from the tremendous social upheaval created by the re-emergence of the woman's movement in the 1960s. Because the meaning of the word "woman" was being redefined, there was a great deal of insecurity about women's roles in society. Thanks, in part, to the efforts of Betty Friedan, who defined the "problem without a name," many women awoke to the realities of the oppression surrounding them. With this awareness they turned a critical eye on nearly every segment of society and they found expressions of sexism permeating their culture. Suddenly traditional social expectations were stifling. Women found themselves caught in limbo,

certain of their dissatisfaction with the socially circumscribed roles but often unable to imagine viable alternatives.

In her study *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* Carol Ann Howells explains how she sees this struggle reflected in Atwood's work: "the greatest challenge for a woman writer is how to position herself in response to changing cultural definitions of 'woman' and its 'constellations' like 'feminine' and 'feminist'" (8). When asked by Jo Brans in a 1982 interview if she was "a feminist writer" Atwood replied, "*Feminist* is now one of the all-purpose words. It really can mean anything from people who think men should be pushed off cliffs to people who think it's O.K. for women to read and write. All those could be called feminist positions" (*Conversations* 140). Because of the broad scope of the term "feminist," Atwood is ambivalent about being labeled as a feminist writer, and defines herself instead as a person concerned with human dignity, characterizing her "feminism" as "human equality and freedom of choice" (*Waltzing Again* 81). She does believe in social equality of women but does not subscribe to many of the techniques and attitudes of Second-Wave Feminists. Therefore, she is hesitant to be regarded as their champion. Indeed, she asserts that her "characters are not role models" nor does she "try to resolve the problems of the living [or] deal out the answers" (*Waltzing Again* 33). Rather, her

role is more reflective. Instead of dealing out the answers, Atwood poses questions and explores the possibilities of social movements.

The third dilemma of Second-Wave Feminism was the antagonistic attitude toward men adopted by many segments of the Women's Liberation Movement. This attitude found a variety of expressions ranging from the 1968 Miss America pageant protest, to "take back the night marches," to some women's refusal to interact with men in any capacity. This inherently antagonistic attitude often fostered a reaction in some men Atwood characterizes as, "Here is this enormously powerful and malevolent female, and she is gonna getcha" (*Waltzing Again* 19). This sentiment can be read as a reflection of the social milieu that could give rise to an anti-feminist backlash.

Critics of Radical Feminism from the political left, including Materialist Feminists, strongly disagree with the Radical Feminist position that the oppression of women is fundamental to all other forms of oppression. These critics maintain that issues of race and of class are at least as important as issues about gender. Liberal Feminists, which include Margaret Atwood, often see precisely the radicalism of Radical Feminism as potentially undermining the gains of the women's movement with polarizing rhetoric that invites backlash and contend that they overemphasize sexual politics at the expense of political

reform. *The Handmaid's Tale* is Atwood's exploration of these central dilemmas of Radical Feminism, which provides the catalyst for the backlash scenario envisioned by Atwood in her creation of the dystopian society of Gilead.

Chapter 3

The Handmaid's Tale in Dialog with Speculative Fiction

The tradition of utopian and dystopian literature is rich and complex, and it is rooted, as Adam Roberts argues in his study *The History of Science Fiction*, in classical literature. According to Roberts, there was an interlude between 400 A.D. and 1600 A.D. He argues “the nascent form [...] in Ancient Greece [...] disappears, or becomes suppressed, with the rise to cultural dominance of the Catholic Church; and re-emerges when the new cosmology of the sixteenth century inflects the theology of Protestant thinkers in the seventeenth” (xiii). Atwood characterizes utopian and dystopian literature as “speculative fiction,” and believes that if novelists are committed to this genre, they may be able to tell us something about the future (*Waltzing Again* 259). Speculative fiction is uniquely able to achieve this goal because, as Northrop Frye maintains in his 1965 tract, “Varieties of Literary Utopias,” “The utopian writer looks at his own society first and tries to see what, for his purposes, its significant elements are. The utopia itself shows what society would be like if those elements were fully developed” (205).

Therefore, according to Frye, utopian writers begin with “an analysis of the present, the society that confronts the mythmaker, and they project this analysis in time or space” (205). Like Frye, who was among her mentors at Harvard, Atwood believes “Literature *can* be a mirror, and people can recognize themselves in it and this may lead to change” (*Waltzing Again*, 34, emphasis author's). It is the unique duty of the speculative novelists of dystopias, then, to reflect our most damaging and/or dangerous social trends taken to their logical conclusion, to spur us to eschew our hubris. Atwood cites *We*, *Brave New World*, and *1984* as classical examples of the genre of dystopian fiction. Indeed these texts, along with utopian texts like *The Last Man* and *Herland*, were central to the development of the genre and influenced Atwood's creation of Gilead.

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* offer glimpses of utopias in accordance with Frye's definition: “an ideal or flawless state, not only logically consistent in its structure but permitting as much *freedom and happiness* for its inhabitants as is possible to human life” (210, emphasis mine). Evgenii Zamiatin, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell take the opposite approach in their respective dystopian novels: *We*, *Brave New World* and *1984*. At the core of these seminal works are social debates about the nature and amount

of freedom provided citizens, as well as who ultimately dictates and controls this freedom.

While there are certainly other utopian and dystopian novels that influenced Atwood to varying degrees, the five novels discussed here contain elements that are particularly important to an analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a critique of Second-Wave Feminism because each is concerned with sexual power politics and relations between the sexes, and shares many other similarities, both with each other, and with Atwood's text. For each text a specific thread has been isolated which Atwood took up and extrapolated in the creation of her work: the dangers of political excess, the utopian ideal of female solidarity, the politics of freedom, the politics of caste, and, finally, failed political resistance.

The Last Man: Dangers of Political Excess

Mary Shelley was among the first English writers to explore the establishment and subsequent failure of what critic Morton D. Paley calls a “millennial society” (xii)¹, based on futuristic projections extrapolated from her own society. Inspired by these social trends, and the people who had surrounded her—such as her late husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron,

¹ Paley argues that Shelley's intention is “not to endorse but to ironize such millennial optimism” (xii). He believes “Shelley's novel is important not only for the power of its presentation of an archetypal story but

and the other members of their group (The Elect)—Shelley created a society capable of infinite goodness and achievement, at least temporarily. In the post-plague world of *The Last Man*, citizens are able to throw off the yoke of servitude and the burden of poverty.

These advances are made possible by the newly established egalitarian republic, which, as Shelley scholar Julie Schuetz observes, “reflects Percy's ideals for utopian political reform and [...] the family-politic” (1), Romantic values Shelley supports and simultaneously subverts. Schuetz believes that “because of the unmediated annihilation that the plague enacts on mankind, the plague thus becomes a metaphor for the destructive effects of excessive political idealism” (1). If *The Last Man* is a criticism of excessive political idealism, it can be read as a precursor to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood also fashions a destructive force, in the form of a military coup, as a means to free society from the excesses of the socio-political movement of Second-Wave Feminism.

The Last Man and *The Handmaid's Tale* offer two distinct and diametrically opposed reactions to the destructive forces within the novels. As Paley notes,

the initial resistance to the plague in [*The Last Man*] seems to support both Mary's ideals for community as well as Percy's ideals of an egalitarian social order. [...] Once the plague arrives in

also for its ironical undermining of high Romantic themes, such as the empowerment of the imagination and the possibility of creating a millennial society” (xvi).

England, the novel places an even stronger emphasis on communal resistance to the plague, a communal resistance which advocates egalitarianism. (ix)

However, Atwood's text lacks any communal resistance. Women in pre-Gilead U.S. Society lacked the communal identity to resist the coup. This was representative of the rifts within Second-Wave Feminism, a movement that struggled to address a diverse array of social, economic, and political concerns facing women in the decades between 1960 and 1990.

By contrast, Shelley's vision of communal resistance is inspiring. Verney, the protagonist, extols the virtues of the post-plague society:

As the rules of order and pressure of laws were lost, some began with hesitation and wonder to transgress the accustomed uses of society... We were all equal now; magnificent dwellings, luxurious carpets, and beds of down were afforded to all... We were all equal now; but near at hand was an equality still more leveling, a state where beauty and strength, and wisdom, would be as vain as riches and birth. (317)

Shelley has created a world which centers on an egalitarian community. Without the driving force of social competition, all survivors are reduced to their common humanity, a potentially unifying force in this post-apocalyptic nightmare.

Though inspiring, Shelley's vision is far from perfect. As Paley astutely points out, "this egalitarian system is undermined by the fact that it is only in the face of death that it is possible" (x). Lacking her husband's Romantic idealism,

Shelley offers a more pragmatic assessment of humanity. Social harmony could not be effected by reforming the severely flawed extant social structures, nor, indeed, through any political avenue. Instead, these structures had to be destroyed. Equality is achieved by force, not by choice.

Atwood also presents Gilead as an ironically egalitarian society. As the Aunts remark at the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Center, each woman should be happy in the knowledge that she is performing her own socially assigned task; women are ostensibly united and relieved of the burden of multiple social roles: wives, mothers, workers, cooks, and maids, to name but a few. Instead of juggling all of these social functions, the women of Gilead are assigned only one of these roles, a system designed to foster camaraderie: "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 162). Thus, each woman works for the greater good of the community and the glory of Gilead. However, this utopian society is designed to oppress and control people rather than to improve their lives.

While the idealism in Shelley's world is undermined by the fact that it is only achievable through death, in Atwood's world, the utopia of Gilead is undermined by Offred's remembrance of the time before:

the dishtowels are white with blue stripes. Dishtowels are the same as they always were. Sometimes these flashes of normality come at me from the side, like ambushes. The ordinary, the usual, a reminder, like a kick. I see the dishtowel, out of context, and I catch my breath. For some, in some ways, things haven't changed that much. (48)

And so, an innocuous domestic item takes on tremendous importance. The entire social structure of Gilead is, at least momentarily, undermined by a white dishtowel with blue stripes.

***Herland*: Utopian Female Solidarity**

In her 1915 novella *Herland*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman also takes up the theme of an egalitarian society. Gilman's utopian vision centers on a women's culture later aspired to by Second-Wave separatists. The women of Herland are prosperous and harmonious in their isolated, female-only society. Their culture is threatened by the intrusion of the three male travelers: Van, Terry, and Jeff. Throughout Gilman's brilliantly satiric novella, the three male travelers attempt to explain modern gender relations to the women of Herland. In response to the women's gently probing questions, Jeff, Van, and Terry strain to find the logic of integral social institutions, such as marriage and family:

[Terry] squared his broad shoulders and lifted his chest. "We do not allow our women to work. Women are loved—idolized—honored—kept in the home to care for the children."
"What is the 'home'?" asked Somel a little wistfully.

But Zava begged: "Tell me first, do no women work, really?"
"Why, yes," Terry admitted. "Some have to, of the poorer sort."
"About how many—in your country?"
"About seven or eight million," said Jeff, as mischievous as ever.
(45)

Exchanges such as these emphasize the feminist thrust of Gilman's novella.

Indeed, she reveals that the social constraints placed on women stem from men.

Upper class women are either "allowed" to work at their husbands' whim, or "idolized" and "honored" by being kept at home, while millions of poorer women have to work, out of economic necessity.

The three male travelers struggle with the Herlandian paradigm to varying degrees. Terry, the most traditional male character, persistently tries to control Alima, his Herlandian "bride." Terry would prefer Alima to give up her communal obligations and remain at home. Alima resists his attempts to "honor" and "idolize" her; Alima refuses to assume the wifely role Terry constructs for her. Alima's social duties are a source of honor and pride and more important than her private duties. Terry is so committed to the traditional way of viewing the social interaction between men and women that he is driven to a rape attempt when Alima refuses to participate in recreational sex. Jeff, at the opposite end of the spectrum, quickly and willingly adopts Herlandian values, thus lending validity to the women's culture. He quickly rejects the

traditional opinion of women as weaker inferiors who must either be dominated or coddled; instead, Jeff accepts the women as equals, worthy of mutual respect.

Van eloquently voices Jeff's realization, which is also, in part, his own:

When we say men, man, manly, manhood, and all the other masculine-derivatives, we have in the background of our minds a huge vague crowded picture of the world and all its activities. . . . And when we say women, we think female—the sex. But to these women . . . the word woman called up all that big background, so far as they had gone in social development; and the word man meant to them only male—the sex. (80)

Van has also come to think of women not as inferior, yet attractive males, but as fully half of humanity constituting their own social group. And so Van reverses his previously held opinions that men are solely responsible for human achievement.

The women of Herland must also re-examine their opinions, values, and beliefs about the opposite sex. In the absence of men, these women have come to think of men as a kind of woman and to assume that the men of the outside must be as devoted to reason, cooperation, and children as they are. Terry's attempted rape of Alima deeply shocks these women. Terry's act was a particularly male kind of violence, directed at another person, not as an individual, but as a woman.

The women of Herland must expand the scope of their definition of humanity and understanding of men in order to keep their women's culture intact. Despite the travelers' attempts to alter the women's views, the women resist their attempts to change Herland, strengthened by female solidarity.

Gilead stands in stark contrast to Herland, lacking the strong bonds of female friendship, community, and respect. Atwood paints a chilling picture of women disunited. The women of the pre-Gilead United States do not assert themselves in the face of the puritanical military regime which seeks to "return to traditional values" (Atwood 7). Instead, they are complicit in their own fall. In her article "From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor observes that Offred is "politically complacent before the takeover" (83). Reflecting on the coup, Offred remembers the few citizen protests, which she did not attend because "Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her. I did think about my family. I started doing more housework, more baking. I tried not to cry at mealtimes" (Atwood 180).

Offred's complicity could be characterized as passive. However, some women in *The Handmaid's Tale* were actual agents of Gilead. Serena Joy, for instance, was a well-known television personality whose speeches, as Offred

remembers, “were about the sanctity of the house, about how women should stay home” (45). Offred found these speeches and Serena’s earnestness frightening (46). Throughout the novel Offred observes Serena, the Wife of her posting. One of her most telling reflections about Serena’s promotion of these traditional values is how Serena reacts to the reality of being a Wife in Gilead: “She doesn’t make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word” (46). Although Serena was clearly an agent of Gilead, she, too, has been trapped by its oppression.

We: the Politics of Freedom

Oppression is a central theme in Evgenii Zamiatin’s 1921 novel *We*. A classic dystopic work, *We* is a forerunner of novels like *Brave New World* and *1984*. Zamiatin’s United State is a rigidly controlled society founded on the premise that freedom and happiness are incompatible. In the “Introduction” to the 1956 reprint of *We*, Peter Rudy points out that “men are congenitally incapable of using their freedom for constructive ends and merely make themselves miserable by their abuse of it; most of them yearn for materialistic happiness and are eager to surrender their troublesome freedom and to be reduced to the status of lotus-eaters” (viii). In Zamiatin’s novel, which Rudy has

labeled “an advanced textbook for the regimentation of mankind” (ix), every public and private function falls within the jurisdiction of state control. All activities are precisely scheduled, by date of occurrence, duration, and authorized co-participants. The United State promotes reverence for rationality and operates with mathematical precision.

Arguably, the most troubling aspect of the book is not the impossibility of Zamatian’s United State, but rather the uncertainty about when the fictive United State would become a reality. Rudy argues that Zamatian's novel reveals, “that even if man is born a rebel at heart, his psychological make-up is so plastic that he can usually be effectively intimidated to the point where he will accept a rigidly controlled pattern of life for a long period of time” (viii-ix). The protagonist, D-503, exemplifies this willingness to accept regimentation:

Oh, how great and divinely limiting is the wisdom of walls and bars! This Green Wall is, I think, the greatest invention ever conceived. Man ceased to be a wild animal the day he built the first wall; man ceased to be a wild man only on the day when the Green Wall was completed, when by this wall we isolated our machine-like, perfect world from the irrational, ugly world of trees, birds, and beasts... (89)

As D-503's musings reveal, regimentation provides security. Rationality is protected from irrationality; order is isolated from chaos.

Just as many readers in the early- to mid-twentieth century were acutely anxious about Zamatian's ideas coming to fruition, Atwood expressed her anxiety about the inevitability of the backlash scenario following the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Compounded by the widespread trend of social freedom in American culture during these decades, the women's movement further exacerbated proponents of traditional values.

The leaders of Gilead envisioned a return to these values: a re-awakening of morality and a promotion of faith-based guidelines to combat social chaos. As Aunt Lydia tells her Handmaid trainees in Chapter 1, "There is more than one kind of freedom [...] 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 24). The freedom to choose to marry or not, to choose to work or not, to choose to bear children or not, has been replaced with the freedom from divorce, bankruptcy, and abortion. Thus, by eliminating a need for choice, the state controls individual desires and directs them into socially acceptable channels. As in the United State of *We*, choice is the enemy of social harmony in Gilead. By controlling choice, citizens' freedoms are controlled as well. The Handmaids have also lost control of their bodies, and, therefore, of their identities.

Brave New World: the Politics of Caste

Aldous Huxley also takes up the themes of freedom and identity in his 1932 dystopian novel *Brave New World*. The World State in *Brave New World* depends upon a highly stratified social structure implemented from the moment of conception. Reproduction has been completely mechanized and now falls solely under the control of the World State. During the gestation period the embryos travel in bottles along a conveyor belt through a factory-like building, and are conditioned to belong to one of five castes: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, or Epsilon. The Alpha embryos are destined to become the leaders and thinkers of the World State (and are predominately male). Each of the succeeding castes is conditioned to be slightly less physically and intellectually impressive. The Epsilons, stunted and stupefied by oxygen deprivation and chemical treatments, are designed to perform menial labor. The process of genetic conditioning also determines one's interests and hobbies, as well as one's sexual eligibility and ability to consume material goods. The Deltas, for instance, are programmed to dislike books and instead be docile, eager consumers. Through the caste system, Mustapha Mond and the other World Controllers have succeeded in removing strong emotions and desires, and minimizing human relationships in society.

Emotions and relationships typical of human societies have been replaced with the desire for food, sex, drugs, and consumer goods. Citizens are conditioned to desire only these World State-provided basics. Since happiness is dictated by the immediate gratification of these desires, stability and social harmony abound. The technological interventions beginning at birth and lasting until death ensure that the World State retains control by changing what people want and then keeping them superficially fulfilled.

The Predestinators estimate the need for various members of each caste, and the Hatchery produces human beings to match their mathematical figures, following the economic rules of supply and demand. The Predestinators rely on two processes of production: the Podsnap Process and the Bokanovsky Process. The Podsnap Process artificially speeds up the ripening of embryos, while the Bokanovsky Process arrests normal human egg development, allowing each egg to bud and produce many identical eggs. Through the Podsnap and Bokanovsky Processes, the lower castes are mass-produced on assembly lines to satisfy the needs of the market, just like any other standardized, manufactured good. The World State enacts the belief that human beings are things meant to be used until they break or wear out.

All citizens of Gilead are also controlled through the establishment of the caste system. The final piece of the civil war, a regressive caste system, creates social classes by clearly delineating differing standards for behavior, dress, and social duties. This strict power structure seeks to eliminate undesirable cultural trends and beliefs while simultaneously controlling a fearful and potentially reactive populace. This stratification legitimizes what Christopher Jones identifies in his article “Women of the Future: Alternative Scenarios” as a “hyper-patriarchy” in which “men reclaim harsh dominance over women” (3-4). Jones accurately captures the psychological impetus for the Gileadean takeover.

In Gilead, women occupy the bottom rung of the social ladder, relegated to the domestic periphery. As Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives or Widows, women are confined to the household, with only two alternatives: banishment or prostitution. And though all men retain more social clout than women, not all men are equally powerful. Men too are constrained and victimized by this social system and its puritanical expectations. This victimization is more tangible, displayed in public executions for expressions of subversive behavior—religious, treasonous, or sexual. Despite this, males ultimately occupy positions of greater power, retain more social freedom, and are provided more opportunities for social mobility.

As in *Brave New World*, the caste system in *The Handmaid's Tale* is ostensibly utilized to simplify the lives of citizens and allow them to more fully enjoy their lives. The Aunts have their own cache of propagandistic sayings, such as: "Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn't reasonable or humane" (Atwood 163). Therefore, according to the Aunts, the new social stratum is liberating. But this attitude, couched in pseudo-feminist sentiment, is the most insidious tool of the patriarchy, a tool designed to convince women that their subservience provides personal fulfillment and serves the common good.

1984: Failed Political Resistance

Like Huxley's *Brave New World* and Zaratian's *We*, George Orwell's *1984* is among the most powerful novels of the dystopian genre. Orwell's vision of a post-atomic dictatorship in which every individual would be ceaselessly monitored by means of the telescreen seemed eerily prophetic in 1949, at the dawn of the nuclear age and prior to the advent of television as a fixture in the family home. That Orwell's fictive society is set a mere thirty-five years into the future exacerbated the fears the novel generated. *1984* remains an important novel for the alarm it sounds against the abusive nature of authoritarian governments and the psychology of power as well as the implications of

language and history. Most important to this discussion, however, is Orwell's depiction of love as a form of failed political resistance, illustrated in Winston's relationship with Julia.

In Oceania the government monitors and controls every aspect of human life to the extent that even having a disloyal thought is against the law. (Thoughtcrime is, in fact, the most serious of crimes.) As in *Brave New World* and *We*, the government relies on citizens to spy on one another to ensure the mandated social order, making genuine human relationships impossible.

As the novel progresses, the timidly rebellious Winston Smith sets out to challenge the Party's power, only to discover the terrifying extent to which it can control and enslave citizens. One of the ways he resists the Party, the ruling entity of Oceania, is through his relationship with Julia, a co-worker from the Ministry of Truth. While Winston is concerned with larger social issues and consumed with the desire to join the resistance, Julia is sensual and pragmatic, content to live in the moment. Despite their differences, Winston is sure Julia is the only other person who hates the Party and wishes to rebel against it as much as he does.

Julia and Winston carry on their relationship for several months and are finally betrayed when they meet up with the supposed leader of the resistance—

the Brotherhood—who turns out to be a spy and informer for the Party. Both are then taken to the Ministry of Love to be interrogated in Room 101. Winston breaks after being threatened with rats, which are his specific phobia. He begs the officials to turn the rats on Julia instead. Winston and Julia meet soon after this and discuss what happened in Room 101:

And perhaps you might pretend, afterwards, that it was only a trick and that you just said it to make them stop and didn't really mean it. But that isn't true. At the time when it happens you do mean it. You think there's no other way of saving yourself and you're quite ready to save yourself that way. You want it to happen to the other person. You don't give a damn what they suffer. All you care about is yourself. (158)

Julia tells Winston that she also broke and begged them to shift her torture to him. Their acts of mutual betrayal represent the Party's final psychological victory. Self-preservation takes precedence over love. The Party has proven that no moral conviction or emotional loyalty is strong enough to withstand torture. Physical pain and fear will always cause people to betray their convictions if doing so will end their suffering. The novel ends on a note of despair as both Winston and Julia are tortured into surrendering to the power of the state.

Similarly, Offred subverts Gilead through heterosexual relationships with men of her household. The first, her illicit relationship with the Commander, removes the barriers of objectivity that should separate them. As Offred reflects

after a series of late-night rendezvous, "He was no longer a thing to me. That was the problem, and the realization has stayed with me. It complicates [...] I don't love the Commander or anything like it, but he's of interest to me, he occupies space, he is more than a shadow. And I for him. To him I'm no longer merely a usable body" (Atwood 161-163). She can no longer dismiss him, just as he can no longer control her. The balance of power has shifted, or so Offred assumes. Though his intentions are purely selfish, Offred does benefit from his interest. In his private space she is afforded more freedom as she reads magazines from the past, plays Scrabble, and uses hand lotion. Since reading and writing are strictly forbidden activities for women this experience is exhilarating. The lotion is significant for Offred because it offers hope of escape. The small act of pampering her skin leads Offred to imagine a future in which someone would again appreciate more than her potentially fecund ovaries. Her activities are socially deviant, but they are still controlled by the Commander—subject to his whims and desires.

The Commander's Wife orchestrates Offred's relationship with Nick, with the hope of Offred conceiving and therefore sparing the entire household from social stigma. Their relationship becomes more than merely another attempt at possible impregnation. Offred falls in love with Nick. This relationship provides

deep fulfillment for Offred who believes “It's lack of love we die from” (103). She suffers in Gilead, in part, because she has no one to love. But this illicit love can only take place outside Gilead's domestic boundaries. There are signs within the household of stale “old love; there's no other kind of love [...] now” (103). Because of their bond and the child they both hope she carries, Nick arranges for Offred's escape from Gilead. This becomes her final and most powerful act of resistance. It is, however, problematic. Though Nick helps her escape, love is not necessarily triumphant. We know nothing of Offred's fate or the fate of her unborn child. It is unlikely that Offred and Nick ever saw one another again.

Offred's resistance and escape are also problematic at the political level. She forgoes opportunities to spy on the Commander for the May Day resistance because she fears jeopardizing her relationship with Nick. Finally, her escape is motivated by self-preservation rather than a desire to affect social change or solicit public outcry against Gilead. Like Serena Joy and the Aunts, Offred is truly complicit in her own oppression.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* employs major tropes and themes of utopian and dystopian literature. In her article “How Can a Feminist Read *The Handmaid's Tale*” Tae Yamamoto argues that

this reciprocal gaze between the present and the past gives [*The Handmaid's Tale*] a twofold function. It is a cautionary tale, in which the reader, watching the extrapolated, exaggerated horrors of the near future, is warned against any potential for those evils in our own time. It also functions as a satire on our own society, in which our own habits and lifestyles are de-familiarized and criticized through being observed from the point of view of an outsider. (197)

Instead of creating merely a warning, or merely a satire, Atwood expertly blends both into a satirical warning. She criticizes the autocracy of Gilead and the secular consumerist culture that preceded it. As an examination of the autocratic tendencies of such a culture Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* warns against self-propagated oppression.

Chapter 4

Women Disunited: The Matriarchy of Gilead

“It's hard to imagine now, having a friend” (Atwood 25).

The previous chapters explored how *The Handmaid's Tale* was inspired by Second-Wave Feminism and the genre of speculative fiction. Indeed, blending these elements was the genesis for Atwood's portrayal in *The Handmaid's Tale* of the disunity of women, and the consequent destruction of female solidarity.

Preying on the social confusion and unrest stemming from the Women's Liberation movement, the patriarchy of Gilead isolates women and then relegates them to the domestic periphery. Reacting to the increasingly strained gender relations of the liberal American culture that preceded it, the Republic of Gilead emerges as the new nation state. In Gilead, all men are *not* created equal: some men are second-class citizens and all women are third-class citizens. To be successful, the patriarchy of Gilead must re-assert male dominance. Women are seen as potentially threatening and subversive, and, therefore, require strict control. They are banned from employment and then forbidden to own property or access assets, rendering them virtual prisoners within their homes. Women's imprisonment paves the way for Gilead's institution of a caste system, which, as

previously discussed, is superficially designed to simplify the lives of citizens by dividing them into classes with clearly delineated standards for behavior, dress, and responsibilities. However, as in all dystopian societies, this caste system is actually a tool of oppression, particularly for women.

The result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is the evolution of a new form of misogyny, not as we usually think of it, as men's hatred of women, but as women's hatred of women. Thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts one viable backlash from our current feminist momentum: gynocentric misogyny and "traditional" misogyny combined in one militaristic socio-religious order. The patriarchy of Gilead establishes a matriarchal network responsible for regulating women through enforcing the division of domestic labor. The matriarchal network ensures that, as Patricia Goldblatt points out in her article "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists," "the work women do conspires to maintain the subjection of their own kind" (4). The epilogue of the novel re-affirms the purpose of the patriarchy: "the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves" (Atwood 308). This comment emphasizes the importance of the patriarchy both for establishing and maintaining the new social order. By relying on women to self-regulate, the founders of Gilead successfully destroy

female solidarity. There are two social systems in which this dysfunctional matriarchy is enforced: the Handmaid training system and the household. These two systems illustrate the public and private enforcement of the matriarchy.

Handmaids are the crux of Gilead's survival, paradoxically the most valued, yet most despised caste. They are charged with reversing the plummeting birthrate, a vital mission following an age of readily available birth control, irresponsible management of nuclear waste and chemical weaponry, and indiscriminate use of agricultural chemicals. After being arrested for participating in non-traditional relationships (second or common-law marriages, or other extra-marital liaisons), the Handmaids are then turned over to the Aunts for training.

At the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centers (also known as the Red Centers), the Aunts indoctrinate the Handmaids in the matriarchy of Gilead. The Aunts are entrusted with the crucial duty of training the Handmaids because they rank among the most powerful female agents of the patriarchal order. In full collusion with the male leaders of Gilead, the Aunts stop at nothing to subdue and domesticate the Handmaids during their initiation.

In the first scene of the novel Offred remembers one of her first nights at the Red Center: "the lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt

Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their belts" (4). In the semi-darkness of what was formerly a high school gymnasium, Offred and the other Handmaids-in-training mourn their lost culture, their lost lives, their lost freedom, and their lost selves. They are now a national resource to be protected and regulated. The Handmaids have lost their humanity; they are now nothing more than potentially productive ovaries.

However, by calling the Handmaids "sacred vessels" and "ambulatory chalices" the Aunts attempt to imbue their mission and status with honor (136). Indeed, the Aunts try to convince the Handmaids that Gilead has actually restored respect for women, who are now valued and appreciated because they are "holding the future in their hands" (55). The Aunts represent themselves as motherly mentors to the Handmaids, guides on the path to successful assimilation into Gilead. They present the mission of Gilead as: "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" (162). Aunt Lydia's pep talk on solidarity is disturbingly ironic in the context of the society it claims to represent. The caste system is not liberating. It is an insidious mechanism of the patriarchy, designed to convince women that their subservience provides personal fulfillment and serves the common good. Aunt Lydia justifies her

mission to Offred's group, "I'm doing my best [...] I'm trying to give you the best chance you can have" (55). The "best chance" the Aunts can provide the Handmaids is intimidation through brainwashing, humiliation, and torture.

As part of a brainwashing campaign, the Handmaids are drugged into complacency and forced to watch pornographic movies. These films, among the Aunts favored tools, depict many sexually degrading and violent acts against women. In a particularly disturbing film, as Offred recounts, "we had to watch a woman being slowly cut to pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach split open and her intestines pulled out" (118). Aunt Lydia uses this film to illustrate the disdain men previously held for women. According to Aunt Lydia, women were merely bodies for men to use and abuse as they pleased. This is ironic on two levels. First, this attitude echoes the sentiments of many Second-Wave Feminists who saw men's objectification of women as the primary source of the social oppression of women. Second, the Aunts are charged with controlling the Handmaids for the patriarchy. The leaders of Gilead view the Handmaids merely as bodies to be used for the good of the nation. The patriarchy has twisted a prominent feminist premise into a tool that enables women to oppress each other.

Within the confines of the Red Center, abuse is predominately psychological. Humiliation is a favorite technique of the Aunts. Janine, another Handmaid-in-training, repeatedly suffers public humiliation. For instance, an Aunt refuses to allow her a restroom break so she soils herself in front of the group. On another occasion, Janine is bullied into admitting she enticed the men who gang raped her, resulting in the abortion that marred her teenage years. Aunt Lydia condemns Janine, and all women who made spectacles of themselves by “oiling themselves like roasted meat on a spit, [revealing their] bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public,” and showing their legs without stockings (53). For Aunt Lydia, the sexual freedom women struggled to attain during pre-Gilead times was the source of their victimization. Women foolishly flaunted their bodies, tempting men to sexual violence. An immodest woman is punished by God, according to Aunt Lydia, to “teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*” (72, emphasis author's). According to the Aunts, as spokeswomen for the patriarchy of Gilead, rape and other forms of sexual and domestic violence are consequences of women possessing sexual freedom and leading men on.

If psychological avenues are unsuccessful, the Aunts use physical violence to control the women in their charge. Offred recounts a few instances of

violence. Her friend Moira, a militant lesbian she knew before the days of Gilead, suffers the Aunts' wrath. Since hands and feet are unimportant to the Handmaids' reproductive mission, the Aunts target these areas for torture; one beating left Moira unable to walk for a week. Nevertheless, Moira continues to resist the Aunts' authority, the only woman in the Red Center who does so. Moira finally escapes from the Red Center. The manner of her escape—taking off her state-issued Handmaid robes and putting on the uniform of an Aunt—symbolizes her rejection of Gilead's attempts to define her identity.

Except for Moira, the Aunts achieve complete control over the Handmaids. The women make a few attempts to comfort one another and establish friendships in the Red Center, but acts of friendship are punishable offenses. Upon discharge from the Red Center, Offred is at the mercy of the matriarchy of Gilead. Within the domestic hierarchy, every woman is a spy and an enemy, even other Handmaids.

Once the Handmaids have been initiated into the patriarchy of Gilead, they are posted to households. The domestic hierarchy, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Wives, operates on mutual dislike. The Wives consider the Handmaids distasteful. During a Birth Day visit, the Commander's Wife makes the following comment to her friends, "Little whores, all of them, but still you

can't be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls?" (115). The Handmaids are personal affronts to the Wives; they are continual reminders of the Wives' failures to conceive. As Aunt Lydia tells her wards, "'It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, [...] it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them. [...] Try to pity them. [...] You must realize that they are defeated women. They have been unable—'" (46). The supposed empathy the Handmaids are asked to feel for the Wives as "defeated women" merely underscores the antagonism created by the patriarchy.

While Offred is cognizant of how Serena Joy, the Wife in her household, suffers under the patriarchy, she feels little, if any, compassion towards her. Offred dislikes Serena intensely for "her part in what was being done to her" (161). Serena was an instrumental figure in the Gileadean takeover, a supporter of a culture based in traditional values that would return women to the home. On a more personal level, Offred dislikes Serena "because she would be the one to raise my child, should I be able to have one after all" (161). This is perhaps the toughest obstacle for Handmaids. They are primed to devote their lives to conceiving children, yet are denied the pleasurable duties of motherhood.

Waiting to be filled with the future of Gilead, Offred sees no glory in her sexual servitude:

“The fact is that I’m his mistress. Men at the top have always had mistresses, why should things be any different? The arrangements aren’t quite the same, granted. The mistress used to be kept in a minor house or apartment of her own, and now they’ve amalgamated things. But underneath it’s the same. More or less. Outside woman, they used to be called in some countries. I am the outside woman. It’s my job to provide what is otherwise lacking.”
(163)

The patriarchy has institutionalized adultery, under the guise of reproduction.

Both Wife and Handmaid/Mistress are required to co-habit the house and must collaborate in the procreative mission of the household.

Conception is the focus of family life in Gilead. Ildney Cavalcanti discusses the dynamics of Gileadean households in his article “Utopias of/f Language.” As Cavalcanti observes, households rely on “the monthly rape ‘Ceremony’ [which] follows the scriptural ‘and she shall bear upon my knees,’ and grotesquely requires the presence of Wife, Handmaid, and Commander. It synthesizes the institutionalized humiliation, objectification, and ownership of women in Gilead” (166). The Ceremony is a socially condoned *ménage à trois*. Offred reflects that “it has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do

with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena" (Atwood 94). As Offred lies on Serena's canopied bed, her arms restrained, and her skirt hiked up to her waist she reflects, "This is not recreation, even for the Commander" (95). Hence, sex has become a rote duty for all parties involved.

To endure the Ceremony, Offred must detach from her body. Detaching from her body enables her to detach from her emotions. Offred learns to view the Ceremony as merely a part of her social duty. Serena, on the other hand, does not have the luxury of detachment. Her participation in the Ceremony requires her to watch her husband having sexual intercourse with another woman, an experience that is upsetting and insulting, to say the least. This disparity leaves Offred wondering, "Which of us is it worse for, her or me?" (95). Serena always cries the night of the Ceremony, but silently. Offred believes Serena does so because, "she's trying to preserve her dignity, in front of us" (95). The Ceremony illustrates Serena's failed intentions to establish domestic harmony by collaborating with the patriarchy. She fought for women to be restored to their traditional roles of wives and mothers, but the reality of being a Wife in Gilead is much different than she envisioned. Controlling Offred is the only outlet through which Serena can express her frustration with a system she once supported.

Except for the nights of the Ceremony, Offred is isolated from the rest of the household. Under Serena's critical and ever watchful eyes, Offred must also do without the meager companionship provided at the Red Center. Offred has a deep wish to establish female solidarity; she desires a bond of friendship and a sense of community with the other women who work and live in the household. However, Offred is continually reminded of her status as a pariah, even in her "home." As Offred remarks, Rita and Cora (the two Marthas), "talk about me as though I can't hear. To them I am another household chore, one among many" (35). For the Marthas, Offred has the same status as any other necessary chore.

Interestingly, the two Marthas have slightly different reactions to Offred's presence. Rita, the older Martha, objects to Offred's household duties: "she thinks I am common. She is over sixty, her mind's made up" (48). Though Offred's only viable alternative to becoming a Handmaid was exile or execution, Rita believes that Offred should not have "chosen" to be a Handmaid. Because of Rita's traditional mindset, she continually criticizes Offred, both directly and indirectly. In contrast, Cora, the younger Martha, delights in the possibility of having a baby to care for. She views Offred's presence as one of hope and happiness for the household. Offred recognizes Cora's scant, yet willing, protection: "It pleased me that she was willing to lie for me, even in such a small

thing, even for her own advantage. It was a link between us" (152). Cora treats Offred with respect and makes some attempts to reach out to her. Cora tolerates, clothes, and feeds Offred because of the child she might ultimately bear. Though Offred appreciates these token actions of respect and kindness, they merely reinforce her identity as a two-legged womb of Gilead.

Despite the Marthas' feelings towards her, Offred still yearns to sit at the kitchen table and visit and chat with them:

But even if I were to ask, even if I were to violate decorum to that extent, Rita would not allow it. She would be too afraid. The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us. 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. [...] I don't smile. Why tempt her to friendship? (11)

Treachery is so ingrained in every aspect of life in Gilead, that Offred realizes that even considering the act of friendship is dangerous. The other women in the household must avoid her, as they have been trained to do, or suffer the consequences. Accordingly, Offred's domestic isolation is filled with silence. She longs to break the perpetual silence that surrounds her with anything, even banal pleasantries: "How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts" (11).

The only quasi-friendship Offred is allowed is the companionship of the Handmaid who accompanies her on their daily walks to market. Yet even here, free from the physical constraints of their respective households, verbal exchanges are limited to socially acceptable catch phrases: expressions of piety and dedication to Gilead. Exchanges that are not scripted are forbidden and risky. Offred and her companion are painfully aware that they meet as neither friends nor equals, but as potential informants. They travel in pairs under the guise of safety but, "the truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (19). The culture of Gilead is based on fear and suspicion; women are rewarded for spying on and betraying other women. Gilead, then, is indeed a culture of female treachery.

The Handmaid's Tale comprises Offred's record of life within the matriarchy of Gilead. As she performs her rote duties, under the strict system of female control, she struggles to come to terms with her multiple losses: culture, family, identity, agency, and, most importantly, companionship. Though the Aunts insist that the household is a place of camaraderie, the domestic hierarchy thrives on mutual dislike and disapproval.

There is no reprieve from the purposeful and lonely life of a Handmaid; nothing must deter her from her mission. Offred is allowed to attend a few

social functions, such as Birth Day celebrations and women's Salvagings; these activities reinforce her role in Gilead. The Birth Day celebrations remind Offred of her duty to her household, her Commander, and her country. The Salvagings remind Offred of the consequences of any failure to follow the rules and regulations of Gilead. All of her other activities are designed to keep her body in prime reproductive health: daily exercises on the floor of her bedroom, daily walks to market, and her scheduled baths. As Margaret Daniels and Heather Bowen assert in their study of female leisure spaces in dystopian novels, this "strictly controlled access to leisure reinforces the Handmaid's enslavement" (426). The Handmaids are doubly enslaved; first, by the patriarchy that developed and then implemented the caste system of Gilead, and second, by the matriarchal system instrumental to this new social order. Within this system of dual oppression the Handmaids are severely constrained. Daniels and Bowen describe their daily life thus, "they have no choice regarding the treatment of their bodies; no permission to select the individuals with whom they pass time; [they have] no control over their lives" (428). Though Offred desperately wants to rebel and reassert her agency, the matriarchy ensures that she and the other Handmaids remain isolated and powerless within the domestic hierarchy that exhibits the most serious consequence of women placing their allegiance to men

before their allegiance to women: the destruction of female solidarity resulting in the disunity of women.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

“The answers you get from literature depend on the questions you pose.”

—Margaret Atwood, *Waltzing Again*.

The Handmaid's Tale ends on a note of disappointing ambiguity. We are left with more questions than answers as Offred steps up “into the darkness within; or else the light” (295). Did Offred escape? What became of her? Did she devote herself to the resistance? The text fails to answer these questions. We turn to the epilogue in hope of closure for Offred's story, but find instead that it undermines the chilling account of Offred's experiences. Titled “Historical Notes,” the epilogue is a transcript of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, set approximately two hundred years after the fall of Gilead. The transcript distances us from the personal immediacy of the novel and re-focuses the narrative on an academic depersonalized view of history.

The novel has asked us to sympathize with Offred and judge Gilead tyrannical and oppressive. However, Professor Pieixoto, a Cambridge historian and the keynote speaker, promotes detachment, telling his audience, “our job is

not to censure but to understand” (302). Pieixoto’s appeal for understanding and the applause with which his audience greets it, suggest that the moral ambivalence of an objective approach sows the seeds for perpetuation of past ills. Offred’s narrative, then, becomes a document to be objectively examined and evaluated for its historical worth. Despite the valuable insights Offred provides into the matriarchal functioning of Gileadean households, and the consequent effect on women’s relationships with one another, Pieixoto views her narrative as overly focused on personal concerns and experiences. Pieixoto criticizes Offred’s failure to capture more “useful” information: “She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. [. . .] However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us” (310). Offred’s “crumbs” are considered unsatisfying, partly because of their focus on the domestic sphere, but primarily because of the dearth of “official,” “useful” documents. Pieixoto and his colleagues would prefer printouts from the Commander’s computer, government documents, anything that might shed light on the political inner-workings of Gilead. They have no interest in what has been called the history of private life.

Pieixoto's dismissive attitude sounds a disturbing echo of Gilead's attempts to render Offred and the other Handmaids invisible. In addition, Pieixoto's urge to silence Offred reflects the attitudes which shaped gender relations prior to the rise of Gilead. Threatened by the social freedoms and power women had gained during the latter half of the twentieth century, men stripped women of their newfound agency. If women are silenced, they can be controlled; and, once silenced and controlled, they lose their identities. Pieixoto reminds his audience that Offred "must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part" (305).

Pieixoto's approach negates one principal of the Women's Liberation Movement: that the personal and the political are inseparable. Since, for Pieixoto the personal is irrelevant, secondary to the official and the political, his own historical moment seems to be one that cannot learn the lessons of Gilead. In addition, his crude jokes, such as the sexual pun on the word "tail," and reference to the "Underground Frailroad," suggest men's attitudes towards women continue to be dismissive and hostile two centuries after Gilead has disappeared. That his jokes are met with laughter and applause merely reinforces this attitude. Thus, the conclusion of *The Handmaid's Tale* offers no comfort. Instead it asks us to contemplate the mistakes of the Gileadean era as a

tale lost on subsequent generations. By placing the events of the novel in an historical context, Atwood urges us to think that such a fate is not far off, but imaginable, especially for societies like Pieixoto's that mask their sexist attitudes with progressivism. The closing line—"Are there any questions?"—gives the narrative a deliberately open-ended conclusion. The end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, then, begins a discussion of the issues the story raises. As Offred tells us, "context is all" (144). And when we look at *The Handmaid's Tale* within the context of Atwood's feminist sympathies and from the vantage offered by the tradition of speculative fiction, we can better appreciate how it functions as a critique of Second-Wave Feminism.

By showing us a possible outcome of the momentum of Second-Wave Feminism, Atwood reveals that radical strains of this movement could backfire, with disastrous results. Indeed, Atwood witnessed a version of this backlash while she wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* during the early 1980s. She saw the conservative revival in America and Britain, fueled, in part, by a strong well-organized movement of religious conservatives, who criticized the perceived excesses of the sexual revolution during the prior two decades. This revival was a counter-assault on the progress women had struggled for during the 1960s and

1970s, and it seems that it partially inspired Atwood to issue *The Handmaid's Tale* as a warning of what could happen in the U.S. and elsewhere.

The Handmaid's Tale paints the conservative revival as stemming partly from a lack of female solidarity characterizing the Second Wave of the Women's Liberation Movement. Feminist theorist bell hooks has argued that "although [the] contemporary feminist movement should have provided a training ground for women to learn about political solidarity, Sisterhood was not viewed as a revolutionary accomplishment women would work and struggle to obtain" (4). For hooks and for Atwood this was one of the most destructive tendencies of Second-Wave Feminism. Without solidarity, without sisterhood, women are not united. If women are disunited they have little hope of making the lasting revolutionary changes they see as necessary for social improvement. Unwittingly, then, they become agents of the oppressive social order they wish to escape. Because feminists allowed themselves to be divided over issues of identity, for example, the entire movement appeared weak and more vulnerable to attack.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood envisions religious revivalism as a counter-revolutionary force responding to a revolutionary doctrine espoused by Second-Wave Feminists. What feminists considered the great triumphs of the

1970s—namely, widespread access to contraception, the legalization of abortion, and the increasing political influence of female voters—have all been undone in Gilead, where women no longer enjoy any of their socio-political freedoms, and are also denied even the simplest of personal liberties. As critics Jennifer Daniels and Heather Bowen note, their “every step, every mouthful of food, every move is observed, reported, circumvented or approved” (428). Women are strictly controlled so that male dominance, which had been threatened in pre-Gilead society, can be re-asserted. The success of the patriarchy depends on female self-regulation, which is masked as female collaboration, and the women of Gilead are trained to place their allegiance to men before their allegiance to women. Gilead relied on the domestic hierarchy for its success. Thus, *The Handmaid’s Tale* illustrates the lack of female solidarity as contributing to the failed feminist revolution and supporting the subsequent backlash of the religious right.

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