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The Handmaid's Tale: A Dystopian Reconstruction of Society

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The Handmaid's Tale: A Dystopian Reconstruction of Society

“A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze.”

–*The Handmaid's Tale*



Figure 1 From Paste Magazine, graphic design by Josh D. Jackson

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M1 TILE

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Introduction

There is little doubt that literature is a powerful tool for authors to communicate their concerns and criticisms as regards the society in which they live, so that their work becomes, in some cases, a window on history, a means for readers to glimpse at the flaws and particularities of even a remote period. One might argue that this is especially true of dystopian literature, which has produced some of the most celebrated novels of the twentieth century¹, and which undoubtedly qualifies as one of the most influential subgenres in history.

Utopia, whose origins as a literary tradition can be traced back to Thomas More², was indeed eclipsed by its bleaker counterpart, from the early 1900s, when the optimistic idea of founding a ‘perfect’ society began to be approached with more caution, and the dangers behind utopian premises were exposed through the terrible social experiments of totalitarian rulers. However different the two notions may appear, it is worth remembering that utopia and dystopia are not opposites. In fact, some of the most famous dystopias, including *Brave New World*³ and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*⁴, were known and referred to by their authors as utopias, as no new term was coined for the emerging genre until 1952⁵. Though the word utopia, invented by Thomas More⁶ and famously composed of the two Greek words, *ou topos* (no place), was certainly intended as a pun⁷, as it bears a phonetical resemblance to the Greek *eu-topia* (good place), it is only with the emergence of dystopia (bad place) that utopia became systematically associated with depictions of ideal societies. Actually, the difference between both traditions is not as clear as one would think. Even utopias that authors may have intended as much better than their contemporary societies would appear dystopian to twenty-first-century readers, and not least among them Thomas More’s, which relies heavily on slavery. In fact, both genres follow the same aim while

¹ For example: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell, 1949), *Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley, 1932), *A Clockwork Orange* (Anthony Burgess, 1962).

² An English philosopher and writer of the early sixteenth century, most well-known for his work *Utopia* (1516).

³ Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. 1932. Vintage Classics 2007.

⁴ Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. 1949. Penguin 2008.

⁵ Gottlieb, Erika. *Dystopian Fiction East and West, Universe of Terror and Trial*. McGill Queen’s University 2001, p. 4.

⁶ More, Thomas. *Utopia*. 1516. Simon and Brown 2010.

⁷ <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/21cc/utopia/utopia.html>, date of access 30/09/2017.

using different strategies: they expose the flaws of a particular society, either by erasing them, or in the case of dystopias, by magnifying them. Finally, both present an imagined world which incites the reader to take a political stance: utopias provide alternative models for society whereas dystopias rather function as a kind of warning, depicting a nightmarish world which the reader must not allow to happen. Thus, it would be a mistake to overlook the similarities between both genres when they are fundamentally connected⁸, in literature and history, as a dystopia is more often than not the result of utopian aspirations.

To give a proper definition of dystopia, one must therefore first define it according to its predecessor. Another way would be to look at the purpose that dystopian literature achieves in society, which, if not radically opposed to that of utopia, is nevertheless distinct. Dystopias typically portray a regime which is the equivalent of hell, at least for the majority of the population⁹. As a matter of fact, the birth of the dystopian genre occurred precisely at a time when people all over the Western world were increasingly less afraid of hell, therefore it is possible to draw links between the widespread decline of religion in the twentieth century and the emergence of dystopia. We may, as Erika Gottlieb suggests¹⁰, view this literary tradition as a post-Christian warning which delineates how civilization will head straight into (secular) damnation, if certain societal wrongs are not made right.

It goes without saying, if dystopias reveal the immoral aspects of the social sphere, that the context in which they are written is essential. And, as feminism continued to gain ground in the second half of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that a few dystopias began to incorporate women's liberation as one of their central themes. When Canadian author Margaret Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale*¹¹, one of her most influential and critically acclaimed novel, it was the mid-1980s. The past few decades had witnessed important progressive legislation in favor of women's rights. Both the contraceptive pill and abortion had been legalized, in the midst of the 60s-70s movement that has sometimes been referred to as a time of "utopian" politics¹².

⁸ Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, "Dystopia and Histories", in Baccolini, Raffaella. *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Routledge New York and London 2003, p. 5.

⁹ For example: the condition of women in *Swastika Night* (Katharine Burdekin, 1937).

¹⁰ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹¹ Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage Books London 1985. From now on, we will refer to the novel as *HT*.

¹² Peter Fitting, "Critique and Utopia in Recent SF Films", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

However, this was significantly followed by an anti-feminist backlash and by the rise of the Moral Majority (now the Religious Right) in the 1980s¹³. Moreover, if we take a close look at the evolution of the dystopian tradition, we may note that the 1980s also marked the onset of a revival¹⁴: the limits of classical dystopias were being challenged by a new wave of authors, among whom Atwood and other female writers played an essential part. In the late twentieth century, numerous women actually turned to science fiction as an ideal genre for the dissemination of feminist ideas, a phenomenon which Joanna Russ deals with in her collection of essays *To Write Like a Woman*¹⁵.

Science fiction is a genre which we must distinguish from dystopia. The Oxford dictionary defines it as “[f]iction based on imagined future scientific or technological advances and major social or environmental changes”¹⁶, which sets it apart from dystopia inasmuch as the hypothetical future to which it takes us does not suffer from the same negative connotation as the “bad place”. However, there are clear similarities between both genres, and many novels happen to be at once science fiction and dystopian¹⁷. Both genres typically reveal or criticize social injustices and, as in a dystopia, a science fiction novel immerses the reader into an unfamiliar universe whose codes they must gradually learn. For those reasons, science fiction and dystopian (as well as utopian) studies are often closely linked, as the works of literary critic Tom Moylan may demonstrate¹⁸.

Another aspect which is interesting as regards science fiction is its construction of fictional worlds, which follows different rules than other literary genres. Professor Denis Mellier argues that the specificity of world-making in science fiction relies on a duality between the story-world it creates and the world in which it is read and written¹⁹. « La présentation d’une alternative par la fiction [...] problématise le monde

¹³ Holland, Jack. *A Brief History of Misogyny*. Robinson London 2006, p. 244.

¹⁴ Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, “Dystopia and Histories” in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons, op. cit.*, p. 3-4. Moylan and Baccolini talk about the “new dystopias” of the 1980s, which are also called “critical dystopias”, and which incorporate both “utopian and dystopian elements”, while “voic[ing] the fears and anxieties of [...] new [...] social and sexual [...] identities in post-industrial societies”.

¹⁵ Russ, Joanna. *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*. Indiana University Press 1995.

¹⁶ https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/science_fiction, date of access 27/10/2017.

¹⁷ For example: *The Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins, 2008), *The Time Machine* (H.G. Wells, 1895) and *Oryx and Crake* (Margaret Atwood, 2003).

¹⁸ *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (Moylan, 2000).

¹⁹ Mellier, Denis. « D’une manière l’autre de faire des mondes : science-fiction et savoirs de la fiction », *ReS Futurae*, N° 2. 2013.

originaire du lecteur et de l'auteur »²⁰, Mellier claims, and we can see this is also (if not particularly) true of dystopia. It is not surprising that critics would pay greater attention to the worlds created by fiction, and that they should especially focus on the “genres of imagination” such as science fiction, fantasy and the fantastic²¹, when we consider that the theory of possible worlds emerged in the discourse on literature from the 1970s²². It is easily summed up by Marie-Laure Ryan when she states: « le monde actuel est entouré d'une multitude de mondes non réalisés », and it is the role of fiction to explore these possible worlds²³. This literary theory was initiated by philosopher Saul Kripke's hypothesis that “there is a plurality of possible worlds among which the one we currently live in”²⁴, though he did not himself connect it to fiction. That is not to say that the critics who study the theory of possible worlds in literature believe every story-world is as real as our own: one must only “start with the assumption that literary fictions represent possible worlds”²⁵, which can simply be defined as “worlds which are logically plausible”²⁶.

It is because those theories are interested in the relation between the textual world and the external one, in fiction's ability to project a reality that may shed light on the reader's, that it becomes so relevant to the study of dystopia which, as we have said, is inextricably linked with the society in which it was written.

Margaret Atwood is an author most popular for her dystopian and science fiction works²⁷. In the novel which this dissertation will focus on, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood raises uncomfortably relevant criticisms about her society, by asking the one question that all science fiction writers must begin with: what if? What if the emancipation of women was simply taken away? What if the advance of fundamentalism led to a totalitarian misogynistic regime in which women were

<http://journals.openedition.org/resf/321>, date of access 19/05/2018.

²⁰ *Ibid*, paragraph 9.

²¹ Anne Besson refers to those three genres as “les genres de l'imaginaire”. Besson, Anne. *Mondes fictionnels, mondes numériques, mondes possibles*. Collection « Essais », Presse Universitaire de Rennes 2016, introduction, p. 11.

²² Lavocat, Françoise. *Théorie littéraire des mondes possibles*. Éditions du CNRS 2010, avant-propos, p. 1.

²³ Marie-Laure Ryan, « Mondialité, médialité », in Anne Besson, *Mondes fictionnels, mondes numériques, mondes possibles, op. cit.*, p. 21.

²⁴ Kripke's model is summed up by Nancy Murzilli in « De l'usage des mondes possible en théorie de la fiction », in *La philosophie de David Lewis. Klesis Revue philosophique*. N° 4. 2012, p. 330 (my translation).

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 331 (my translation).

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 328 (my translation).

²⁷ *HT* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) are a few examples.

stripped even of their most basic rights? What if the course of history was disrupted by a leap backwards, as regards technological and humanitarian progress, and women were reduced to their biblically assigned roles, that is to say: spouses, servants, and most significantly, mothers.

These are some of the questions that Atwood explores in her novel through the creation of Gilead, a theocracy²⁸ in which the main part of the population is held in bondage by a tyrannical elite. It is through the eyes of the narrator, Offred, that we discover the transformed government of the United States, in which she has been trained to become a Handmaid, to produce offspring for a childless family, by having regular intercourse with the *pater familias*, the Commander. In a world where toxic waste and chemical-warfare have caused a massive drop in childbirths, bearing a healthy child to term is not given to all women. Indeed, the Handmaids are granted three chances to fulfill the task that is expected of them, in three different families²⁹. When those chances have been spent, Handmaids cannot be integrated in another social class and serve a different purpose. Childbearing is their only hope for salvation, as is illustrated by a biblical quotation which recurs throughout the novel and which is taken literally: “Give me children, or else I die”³⁰.

As the narrator herself refers to her story as a “reconstruction”³¹, we may also view Atwood’s story-world as a reconstruction of society founded on dystopian and misogynistic principles. Much as Mellier argued, the world of Atwood’s dystopia must be understood in relation to the world of the reader: it takes “one world to signify another”³². It is with this in mind, and considering the theories on the construction of fictional worlds which we have mentioned above, that we have decided to call this dissertation: *The Handmaid’s Tale: A Dystopian Reconstruction of Society*.

The main issue which it will endeavor to examine is the extent to which Atwood’s novel follows dystopian conventions, how it falls into the footsteps of classics of the genre while challenging some of its limitations, borrowing from other literary

²⁸ A theocracy can be defined as “government of a state by immediate divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided” according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theocracy>, date of access 15/05/2018.

²⁹ We learn p. 25 that Serena’s husband is Offred’s “third” Commander, which is “[n]ot so good for her”, and it is said p. 71 that Offred doesn’t “have a lot of time left” (Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*)

³⁰ Genesis, 30: 1-3

³¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 144.

³² Denis Mellier, « D’une manière l’autre de faire des mondes : science-fiction et savoirs de la fiction », *art. cit.*, paragraph 27 (my translation).

traditions and delivering a strikingly human account of a woman's struggle against absolute oppression.

Our first part will focus on the narrator, and we shall begin by determining the degree to which Offred corresponds to the 'typical' dystopian protagonist. Thus, we will discuss the total immersion in dystopian Gilead, which Atwood achieves in part by disguising her narrative as a fictional autobiography, compelling the reader to perceive Gilead only through the eyes of her narrator. Our third focus shall be the alienation of the narrator and its efficiency in denouncing the evils of a society that suppresses individualism. Lastly, we will approach the narrative as a reconstruction, discussing how Atwood uses time in this story to give an impression of fragmentation, which illustrates the brutal changes that have been enforced by Gilead and their impact on its inhabitants.

Our second part shall be dedicated to the enslaved population of Gilead and therefore must above all study the central issue of genders and gender relations in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The first step to this approach will be to examine the codified misogyny of Gilead; we will then move on to the redistribution of powers among the different social classes, before finally focusing on how Atwood's novel relates to the specific tradition of feminist dystopias, which developed as early as the mid-1920s³³.

The third and final part of this dissertation will concentrate on Atwood's treatment of resistance against Gilead. First, it will be necessary to examine the regime itself, before we can see that it is in every way antagonistic with the notion of the human (an opposition which is at the heart of most dystopias). We will then see how the characters of *The Handmaid's Tale* can assert themselves against Gilead, before finally studying the link between language and resistance. We can see how such a connection would be crucial in the eyes of any storyteller, and most especially when their story deals with a government which suppresses individuality and truth as well as imagination.

³³ Ildney Cavalcanti, "The Writing of Utopia and the Feminist Critical Dystopia", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons, op. cit.*, p. 49.

I – The Narrator

“The self is changed first by stripping away markers of identity, and then by active reconstitution.”³⁴

The ambition of the following part will be to discuss the importance of the narrator in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as in dystopia at large. First, we can begin by establishing that Atwood uses a first-person narration throughout her novel, with the exception of the “Historical Notes”³⁵, whose structure is actually reminiscent the standard stage play format³⁶. Secondly, we can observe that Offred is an intradiegetic and homodiegetic narrator, based on Gérard Genette’s definition of the terms³⁷. Finally, she is also the focalizer, that is to say, the character whose point of view the reader adopts to enter the story-world.

Though the narrator of Atwood’s novel is easier to define than its narratee, the person or character to whom the narrative is addressed³⁸. On the one hand, the “*Dear You*”³⁹ that Offred speaks to may be a character, someone that she hopes will somehow come across her story. On the other, it is difficult for the reader not to feel they are the one being addressed by the pronoun “you”, thus creating a bridge from Offred’s fictional world to the reader’s.

1. The Dystopian Protagonist

Dystopian fiction has no doubt provided us with a variety of unforgettable main characters, far too complex for one to easily gather them under a same label. John the

³⁴ Ildney Cavalcanti, “The Writing of Utopia and the Feminist Critical Dystopia”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons, op. cit.*, p. 19.

³⁵ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 311-324.

³⁶ The list of Chair and Keynote Speakers recalls the *Dramatis Personae* page (*ibid*, p. 311), the characters’ names appear in capital letters and precede the dialogues (*ibid*, p. 311), and finally the audience’s reactions, in italics and parentheses, very much recall stage directions (*ibid*, p. 313).

³⁷ Richard Walsh sums up Genette’s idea in his article “Who is the Narrator”: the intradiegetic narrator is inside the story-world, and the homodiegetic narrator is involved in it. Walsh, Richard. “Who is the Narrator?” *Poetics Today*. Vol. 18, N° 4. 1997, p. 497.

³⁸ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/narratee>, date of access 19/05/2018.

³⁹ “*Dear You, I’ll say. Just you, without a name.*” Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 49.

Savage, for instance, the self-flagellating, Shakespeare-impassioned Indian of Huxley's *Brave New World*, seems at first glance to have little in common with D-503, a mathematician, a true-believer in the One State and the protagonist of *We*⁴⁰, one of the first dystopian novels to criticize the post-revolution Soviet regime. However, there are certain characteristics that we might argue are shared by a vast majority of dystopian protagonists. It is essential for us to address them and determine the extent to which Atwood's heroine, Offred, reflects these dystopian traits.

1.1. The Victim-Protagonist

The typical dystopian hero is unlikely to be overly heroic, precisely because the credibility of their ordinariness is crucial to fully translate the atrocity of the oppressive regime. It is paramount that the reader should relate to them completely, which accounts for the importance of first-person narration in Atwood's novel. For those same reasons of identification between reader and character, a dystopian protagonist will rarely display remarkable courage in circumstances of oppression. For the impact of the dystopia to be at its fullest, the reader must be made to think that the protagonist could be just anyone, hence the recurrent figure of the 'everyman'⁴¹ as a typical protagonist of dystopian novels, a main character who is not a hero, who, like the reader (presumably), possesses no particular set of skills.

In fact, the word 'everyman' is derived from a medieval English morality play, in which the protagonist is a synecdoche for mankind, and whose fate is "dramatized from the Christian viewpoint"⁴². We can see that the use of this figure in dystopian fiction is not coincidental, as the plight of the dystopian hero often represents the plight of humanity at large, which has perhaps not fallen into Christian hell but is imprisoned in a most hellish society nonetheless. In *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, Erika Gottlieb specifically refers to Winston, the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as a "modern Everyman [who] struggles [...] against the dehumanizing forces of totalitarian dictatorship"⁴³. Dystopia, as we have said, is a warning aimed to leave a lasting impression on the reader. The more they will relate to the protagonist, the more

⁴⁰ Zamyatin, Yevgeny. *We*. 1924. Penguin Classics 1993.

⁴¹ The everyman is defined by the Collins Dictionary as "a person or fictional character regarded as representing the human race or the common person".
(<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/everyman>, date of access 18/05/2018).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

profoundly they will experience the brutality of the dystopia. Therefore, a dystopian hero is always, even though they may themselves be perpetrators of injustice, first and foremost a victim of the regime.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood often puts the emphasis on what Offred herself views as a lack of courage⁴⁴, most notably when she calls herself a “coward” who “hate[s] the thought of pain.”⁴⁵ Yet those fears are no less relatable than Winston’s⁴⁶ dread of torture. Far from alienating the reader from the protagonist, this enables the author to unite them through the most primal of human instincts. Though for the sake of plot, the ‘ordinary’ protagonists will often be willing to join a body of organized resistance, their limitations will in most cases be emphasized. Atwood’s novel, much like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, stresses the fact that torture infallibly wrings the truth (and any number of convenient lies) out of anyone⁴⁷. The point of dystopian literature is not to depict exceptional bravery, but to express the struggle of the human condition when it is grinded by a totalitarian state.

Victimization therefore becomes an essential tool for the author of dystopian fiction. It may bring the reader to feel sympathy for the character, something which is also achieved by the affinity between the dystopian genre and tragedy.

1.2. A Tragic Hero?

In her study on Eastern and Western dystopian fiction, Erika Gottlieb argues that dystopia is a “no-man’s land”⁴⁸ between satire and tragedy⁴⁹. A dystopian protagonist has indeed a lot in common with a tragic hero⁵⁰, insomuch as they will both have experienced important losses (of their loved ones, social statuses, sense of identity) as a result of something which is utterly beyond their control. In dystopian fiction, the

⁴⁴ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 179, 283, 297.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110-11.

⁴⁶ George Orwell, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

⁴⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 256-257.

⁴⁸ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ The online Literature Glossary gives an account of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy: “a genre that depicts a noble character” who eventually “falls from grace”, “creat[ing] the emotions of pity and fear in its audience [and] purging [them] in an act of catharsis”. <https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/tragedy.html>, date of access 15/05/2018.

⁵⁰ The online dictionary defines a tragic hero as “a great or virtuous character [...] who is destined for downfall, suffering, or defeat” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/tragic-hero>, date of access 15/05/2018) while Aristotle, according to the website Literary Devices (<https://literarydevices.net/tragic-hero/>, date of access 15/05/2018) defines such a character as “a person who must evoke a sense of pity and fear in the audience”.

victims of the regime are not only those who rebel, but a majority of individuals who were simply born into an enslaved category, thus determined by birth to a certain fate which they will often find impossible to escape. This is most famously found in the Conditioning Center of *Brave New World*⁵¹, where human beings are hatched and even at the stage of fetuses, determined to belong to a certain social class. This is perhaps the most important common point between dystopia and tragedy: everything, in both genres, is predetermined. Women, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, are forced into servitude on the basis of their gender alone. The religious frame of Gilead makes it evident that their guilt dates back to the original sin, a story which itself follows the stages of Greek tragedy: to taste the fruit of knowledge was Eve's hubris, her ineluctable punishment the predicament of the human condition, and so it is the case for the whole of womankind in Atwood's novel. Both dystopian and tragic protagonists suffer an injustice which, at least in the case of dystopia, will not inevitably be followed by redemption.

Offred's situation may by all means evoke tragedy, through the loss of her freedom, and perhaps even more poignantly, the loss of her daughter, which is one of the worst traumas she endures in the novel. As it is the case with victimization, tragedy participates in strengthening the impact of dystopia, presenting characters in unimaginable situations that the reader (ideally) feels they must not allow to happen. There is, in dystopia, the same impetus towards social change that can be found in utopia, and part of what the author must expose is the human affliction that is inevitable under totalitarian rule. This is achieved, as we have seen, through the presentation of the protagonist as tragedy-stricken, victimized, and perhaps most significantly, dehumanized.

1.3. A Dehumanized Protagonist

This is a third characteristic one systematically encounters in dystopia, though it may come in various shapes. The increased mechanization of urban life brought about by the industrial revolution inspired many authors of the early twentieth century who were also influenced by the slowly-emerging "shadow" of utopia⁵², and far from marveling at the changes, criticized the dehumanizing aspect of the machines that were

⁵¹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

⁵² This is how dystopia is referred to in Tom Moylan's *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*. Westview Press 2000, p. 111.

becoming central to everyday life. Though a recurrent and most famous image in science fiction⁵³, the omnipresence of the machine is not the only level of dehumanization that is to be found in dystopia. *The Handmaid's Tale* does not really present us with any such entity. However, the regulation of even the most intimate aspects of private life, especially the formalized intercourse between Offred and the Commander which are depicted using the lexical field of industry (sex referred to as a “process” and the child that may be begotten as a “product”⁵⁴) do evoke this dystopian theme of turning individuals into machines, commodities that exist only to serve the state. The Handmaids’ sexuality is limited to those “Ceremonies” which are utterly deprived of eroticism, affection and privacy. On a perhaps less intimate level, conversations are also strictly regulated, as the exchanges between Offred and Ofglen demonstrate⁵⁵. By obliterating the private spheres of individuals, the state dehumanizes them, and achieves fuller, even absolute domination over them. This is something which recurs in all of the dystopias that have become classics of the genre⁵⁶. It is probably what horrifies us most, accustomed as we are to acknowledging the value of individualism. A totalitarian state, dystopia warns, will tolerate only the public sphere, for human beings have no value to the state as human beings. For the subjects to be fully functional in their servitude, they must be stripped of all that is inherent to humanity.

Even prayers, which ought to be at the core of such a society as Gilead, given its deeply religious façade, have become ridiculously impersonal, as is demonstrated by the passage of the “Soul Scrolls”⁵⁷. The “toneless metallic voices” of the machines that print out prayers desacralize the individualistic aspect which is essential to most religions, while obviously calling to mind the well-known motif of the machine taking over its human-maker⁵⁸. In such a world as this, people become little more than numbers. In Zamyatin’s dystopia, *We*, this is taken in the literal sense as people no longer even have names. Atwood may have had this in mind when she described

⁵³ For example: *The Machine Stops* (E.M. Forster, 1909) and *Player Piano* (Kurt Vonnegut, 1952).

⁵⁴ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁵⁵ We can think of such formulas as “Praise be” and “May the Lord open” *ibid*, p. 29.

⁵⁶ *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1949), *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932), *Fahrenheit 451* (Ray Bradbury, 1953).

⁵⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁵⁸ Artificial Intelligence takeover is a common theme in science fiction, see for example the *Legends of Dune* series (Frank Herbert, 2004), *R.U.R.* (Karel Capek, 1921) or *L’imaginaire de l’être artificiel* (Jean-François Chassay, 2010).

Offred's reaction, when looking at people who have been hanged on the Wall, who are now "undifferentiated material", whose "heads are zeros"⁵⁹.

Yet this is something of a paradox, if we consider the importance of the protagonist in dystopias. Following this literary tradition, the reader is meant to be immersed into a world whose rules and particularities are unfamiliar, and which will only be perceived through the eyes of the main character. There lies the contrast between the attitude of the state towards individualism and the truth: because the dystopian protagonist is never really a "zero".

2. Through their Eyes

The way in which the reader discovers the new world that is presented to them is another significant difference between utopia and dystopia. In utopia, this often occurs in the form of a travel undertaken by the main character, as in the famous works of Thomas More and Jonathan Swift⁶⁰. At a time when a lot of the world remained uncharted territory for Europeans, it made sense to imagine that truly original societies would be uncovered in this fashion. Dystopias, however, take us through a much more enigmatic and, in a way, a much more claustrophobic process. Most often, the reader is immediately immersed into the dystopia, and both its nightmarish world and its protagonist only gradually reveal their idiosyncrasies. In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Moylan compares a dystopia to a detective story: in both genres, he tells us, the reader is intended to pay attention to the various clues bestrewn by the author, so that the truth behind this obscure society, and often its equally mysterious protagonist, will slowly be brought to light⁶¹.

This is what the following part of our dissertation will be concerned with: how the reader discovers Atwood's narrator, Offred, and through her eyes, the whole universe of Gilead.

2.1. A Fictional Autobiography

The realistic depictions of Offred's feelings and thoughts, the use of the first-person pronoun as well as various efforts to make the narrative appear plausible, indicate that

⁵⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁶⁰ Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. 1721. Wordsworth Editions 1992.

⁶¹ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, *op. cit.*, p. 5-6.

The Handmaid's Tale is intended to be read as a fictional autobiography⁶². The “Historical Notes”⁶³ which serve as an appendix (and are certainly an homage to the structure of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) participate in bringing verisimilitude to the narrative, as Offred’s tale is treated as an object of study by (the obviously fictional) Professor Pieixoto, engaging the reader to view it as a testimony of the historical period of Gilead. Offred’s omissions and fallible memory also contribute to the plausibility of the story, as it gives us the impression of a human protagonist that omniscient narration could not have achieved.

It would be interesting for us to discuss the advantages and limitations enabled by a first-person narrative, in Atwood’s novel, and more broadly speaking in dystopian fiction. To begin with, we can remark that Atwood is by no means the only author of the genre to resort to first-person narration: so does, for instance, Anthony Burgess in *A Clockwork Orange*⁶⁴. On the one hand, it contributes to a fuller immersion of the reader into the dystopian world, making the role of the protagonist, or in this case narrator, even more central, as the reader is led to identify with them. On the other, it sometimes makes the mechanism of the dystopian regime more difficult to grasp, as much of it may elude the narrator’s knowledge.

Surely in the case of Atwood’s novel, the autobiographical form is meant to strengthen the reader’s relation to Offred’s predicament. Few details of her everyday life are kept from us, from the inconvenience of her long red dress in the heat to the creative means she must resort to in order to occupy her days, which are characterized by confinement and solitude. According to scholar Maria Varsam, autobiography in dystopia is a “necessary means of expressing the immediacy of experience as well as its authenticity”⁶⁵ and indeed, as regards Offred’s narrative, one would find it difficult to argue against this. First-person narration enables us to experience the dystopia in a much more chilling, personal manner.

Though that is not to say this mode of writing is without flaws. As we have pointed out, it makes it convenient for the author to omit important information regarding the

⁶² Expert Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as « le récit rétrospectif en prose que quelqu’un fait de son expérience, quand il met l’accent principal sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l’histoire de sa personnalité » (Lejeune, Philippe. *L’autobiographie en France*. Armand Colin 1971, p. 14). Pour Lejeune, l’autobiographie est caractérisée par une insistance à la fois sur l’introspection et sur la vérité.

⁶³ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 311-324.

⁶⁴ Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. 1962. W. W. Norton & Company 2001.

⁶⁵ Maria Varsam, “Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others” in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

origins and functioning of the regime, centering the focus inward, through a specific and unique prism into the character's psyche rather than towards the external world. Much of *The Handmaid's Tale* places us directly inside the narrator's thoughts⁶⁶, which gives way to a narrative mode close to the stream of consciousness⁶⁷. However, the greatest limitation of a first-person narration is probably the questions it raises regarding the reliability of the narrator. In the words of Irène Langlet: nothing guarantees the "good faith" of a fictional protagonist⁶⁸, and Offred most certainly shows instances of unreliability. Physical restrictions such as fallible memory account for some of it⁶⁹, but Offred's unreliability goes much deeper than that: "In fact I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards"⁷⁰. Here, it is clear that the narrator herself casts doubt on the trustworthiness of her account, and it is perhaps even more explicit in a later example: "I made that up. It didn't happen that way"⁷¹. This is especially interesting if we consider the multiple references to mental illness in the novel, perhaps suggesting that Gilead is only a fiction occurring in Offred's brain because she suffers from insanity⁷². Though a fully alternate reading from this perspective is prevented by the fact that Offred later dismisses the possibility and even further by the "Historical Notes", as the existence of Gilead is confirmed by Professor Pieixoto and other scholars, it does contribute to raising questions about this elusive protagonist, whom we know little of despite our full immersion into her thoughts. It also adds to the dreamlike, or rather nightmarish quality of dystopian fiction, deliberately toying with the reader, who has no choice but to see Gilead through the eyes of the narrator⁷³.

⁶⁶ For instance, we may think of the second chapter of the novel, when the reader discovers Offred's room: there is no formal description, the reader only visualizes the objects named by Offred, as if they were in front of them. "A chair, a table, a lamp [...] A window, two white curtains [...] But a chair, sunlight, flowers" Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 17-18.

⁶⁷ According to Literary Devices, the stream of consciousness is "a method of narration that describes happenings in the flow of thoughts in the minds of the characters". <https://literarydevices.net/stream-of-consciousness/>, date of access 15/05/2018.

⁶⁸ Langlet, Irène. *La science-fiction : lecture et poétique d'un genre littéraire*. Armand Colin 2006, p. 68 (my translation).

⁶⁹ For example: "This is what she says [...] more or less. I can't remember exactly" (Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 255).

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 150.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 273.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 119 "[...] maybe they're drugging me. Maybe the life I think I'm living is a paranoid delusion" and p. 105 "Maybe I'm crazy and this is some new kind of therapy."

⁷³ In this sense, we are close to the somewhat claustrophobic atmosphere created by the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) and *The Black Cat* (1843).

We may point out that the ambiguity of Offred's narration is reminiscent of the fantastic, and especially of the tension between the reader's two lines of interpretation which Tzvetan Todorov talks about in his study of the genre⁷⁴. Indeed, he points out that the reader of a fantastic story may doubt whether the events described are actually taking place in the story-world or whether they are only a product of the narrator's (perhaps delusional) imagination⁷⁵.

As a final remark regarding Offred's unreliability, we may observe that though we are clearly dealing with a story narrated retrospectively⁷⁶, which implies the storyteller is logically aware of how the tale will end⁷⁷, this is in utter contradiction with the ambiguity of Offred's fate, at the end of the story, as the reader cannot know whether Offred has been rescued or captured by the government⁷⁸. In fact, despite her claims that this story is a "reconstruction"⁷⁹, the reader is often under the misleading impression that Offred is simply telling (or imagining) this narrative as she goes along, without the tools provided by retrospection. The use of the present tense and the fact that Offred never mentions she is in any way recording⁸⁰ her tale especially favor this confusion. Indeed, if Offred has recorded this story, then she must be aware of its ending, which raises questions as to her decision to finish on such an ambiguous note⁸¹.

All of these elements indicate that the unreliability of Atwood's narrator transcends the expected shortages of a subjective point of view. Yet Offred remains, in her own words, committed to "truth"⁸², and we have no choice but to take her word for it, as she functions as our gateway into the world of Gilead. This is the specificity of the guided perception which dystopias often introduce. Indeed, it is through the eyes of the protagonist that the reader will discover the unfamiliar norms of the story-world

⁷⁴ In a fantastic narrative, the reader should "hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described" Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. 1973. Cornell University Press 1975, p. 33.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 45. Poe's stories, which we have cited above, are a perfect example for this sort of narration.

⁷⁶ *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë, 1847), which also makes use of first-person narration and retrospection, works much like *HT* as a fictional autobiography.

⁷⁷ « L'énigme [...] n'en est plus une pour le narrateur au moment où il [la] raconte » (Irène Langlet, *La science-fiction : lecture et poétique d'un genre littéraire*, *op. cit.*, p. 71).

⁷⁸ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 144.

⁸⁰ We know from the "Historical Notes" that Offred's narrative was found in the form of "cassettes" (*ibid*, p. 313).

⁸¹ "And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light." (*ibid*, p. 307).

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 279.

and thus experience what Darko Suvin has coined as “cognitive estrangement”⁸³, which characterizes science fiction literature⁸⁴ at large⁸⁵. Let us linger a little on guided perception and its implications in dystopia.

2.2. Guided Perception

In a dystopia, it is “necessary for the reader to accept the narrator’s point of view” as it is “an important sign in the genre for signaling and documenting the discrepancy between the world they experience and the one they desire”⁸⁶. That is to say that our whole perception of the dystopian world will be guided by the protagonist, which in stylistic devices is often translated by devices of “defamiliarization”⁸⁷. This is to be differentiated from Suvin’s principle of cognitive estrangement⁸⁸, as it refers to the importance of perception in art, especially dystopian art. According to Maria Varsam: “defamiliarizing objects of reality [...] invites the reader to observe the dystopian world as the narrator observes it”⁸⁹. Moreover, defamiliarization is to be linked with social critique as it brings out “conditions that exist already but which [...] we can no longer see.”⁹⁰ This is the process of dislocation that dystopias favor instead of the most direct form of a voyage found in utopias. Through those new eyes, the reader will know that they are travelling to a new world, without any actual travel being required.

In fact, as Denis Mellier points out, it is also by making the reader feel like “a foreigner in his own world”⁹¹ that science fiction constructs fictional worlds, which as we have said are to be viewed in relation to that of the reader. Through Offred, who is ‘reconstructing’ her story, Atwood reconstructs the world the reader knows to make it

⁸³ Suvin, Darko. *Pour une poétique de la science-fiction*. Collection Genres et Discours, les presses de l’Université du Québec 1977, p. 12.

⁸⁴ Here, we could make a parallel with the fantastic once again, as it also relies on effects of defamiliarization, like dystopia and science fiction.

⁸⁵ “For Suvin, the key to cognitive estrangement is the presence in a story or novel of what he calls a ‘novum’, that is a device or machine that is absolutely new and whose presence compels us to imagine a different way of conceiving our world.”

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095622261>, date of access 22/03/2018.

⁸⁶ Maria Varsam, “Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 206.

⁸⁸ Varsam does note the connection between defamiliarization and Suvin’s estrangement as both “critique accepted views of the world [by making] the real world [...] appear ‘strange’” (*ibid*).

⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*.

⁹¹ Mellier, Denis. « D’une manière l’autre de faire des mondes : science-fiction et savoirs de la fiction », *art. cit.*, paragraph 20.

seem unfamiliar, though at the same time, they will acknowledge it bears an uncanny resemblance with their own. The theory of possible worlds establishes a yet more poignant relation between text and reality, as “the opposition between the fictional and the real is replaced by [...] the *actual* world and the *possible* world[(s)]”⁹². That is to say that this dystopian, nightmarish universe depicted by Atwood is not *false* any more than it is *unreal*, which would certainly be more reassuring to the reader. On the contrary, it is deeply rooted in reality, though its connections with the actual world are made to seem unfamiliar.

Atwood achieves this defamiliarization notably through the use of catachresis (a forced and especially paradoxical figure of speech⁹³). Offred’s assertion that she “hunger[s] to commit the act of touch”⁹⁴ is a perfect illustration of this stylistic device, hunger being associated to the wrong sense, whilst the verb “commit” immediately suggests that what the narrator craves is prohibited. This line is set at the second chapter of the novel, when the reader is still confused as regards Offred and the world she lives in. We can argue this is the kind of clues that Moylan was referring to in his parallel with the detective story. Another instance of this defamiliarization technique is the systematic comparison of familiar objects with unusual things: the mirror is “like the eye of a fish”, men’s urinals resemble “babies’ coffins”⁹⁵. By having us look at the world in a way utterly different from what we are accustomed to, Atwood, as most dystopian authors, not only achieves to plunge the reader into a decidedly unfamiliar world, but also, through the use of such images, gives us crucial insight as to the narrator’s state of mind. Images of death, nature and an omnipresent eye are recurrent throughout the novel, and they are perfectly fit to illustrate Offred’s unnatural slavery, the mighty surveillance of the state and the constant threat of death which hangs over the Handmaids.

This renewed perception is then necessarily limited by the subjectivity of the narrator. We may also remark that those limitations are illustrated by the white wings of Offred’s outfit, which hinder her sight and might be viewed as a synecdoche of her condition: “it’s hard to look up [...] to get the full view, of the sky, of anything.” The

⁹² Nancy Murzilli, « De l’usage des mondes possible en théorie de la fiction », *art. cit.*, p. 333.

⁹³ As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/catachresis>, date of access 02/11/2017.

⁹⁴ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 19 and 83.

reader, just like Offred, must learn to “see the world in gasps”⁹⁶. This metaphor also evokes the fragmentation which is at the core of Offred’s narration.

Thus, we see the point of this internal focus, however detrimental it may be to our objective knowledge of Gilead. What the reader does learn about in exhaustive detail is the routine of Offred’s life as a Handmaid, which contrasts with the ambiguity surrounding her past and future. By presenting us with the often repetitive activities that frame the narrator’s days, Atwood further immerses the reader into her confining, claustrophobic universe. It is time for us to pay closer attention to it.

2.3. The Everyday Life of a Prisoner

In her preface to Huxley’s *Brave New World*⁹⁷, Margaret Atwood wrote that any dystopia must “cover the same basic ground” as all societies, that is they must answer: “where do people live, what do they eat, what do they do about sex [...] who has the power?” It is beyond doubt that those questions are addressed in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which takes us into the most intimate spheres of Offred’s life, delineating what must strike the reader as awfully close to a prisoner’s situation. Part of what Atwood aims for in this book is the re-creation of ‘normal life’, even in such a terrible setting as Gilead. Indeed, the reader discovers that Offred is an unjustly enslaved woman, who endures psychological and sexual abuse on a regular basis. But she also eats, sleeps, goes to the marketplace, and the reader is equally privy to those banalities. It is especially relevant as regards the realism of Offred’s story, that she does not only include sensational events but especially stresses the lack of occupations. One would require a stronger word than boredom to appropriately describe how helpless Offred is to fill her days. At some point in the novel, she agrees to pay secret visits to the Commander’s office, partly because “it occupies space [...] It’s something to do”⁹⁸.

The parallels between Offred and a prisoner are numerous: she considers “scratching marks on the wall”⁹⁹ for each day of the week, “divide[s] the room into sections”¹⁰⁰ which she thoroughly searches one by one, just as one would count the stones of one’s prison. This may seem trivial when we compare it to scenes like the

⁹⁶ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁹⁷ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World, op. cit.*, p. IX.

⁹⁸ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 172.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 209.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 79.

Salvaging¹⁰¹ or the infamous Ceremonies, but it is truly essential to the atmosphere of the novel, which is uncomfortable at best, really quite closer to claustrophobic. Atwood's choice to include the "long parentheses of nothing"¹⁰² of Offred's life has two consequences. First, it strengthens the bond between reader and narrator by means of empathy: the reader is spared no step of Offred's ordeal and must therefore share her experience. Literally, they are trapped inside of her and are as powerless as she is to escape those "parentheses". The process of identification is further increased by the added plausibility they bring to Offred's story: sleeping and eating and having nothing to do are aspects we usually find in real life rather than in fiction. Secondly, those "parentheses of nothing" become in themselves one of the traumas resulting from Atwood's dystopian society, on the same basis as more violent episodes like Particution¹⁰³, to which we will return later in this paper.

We may also add that the careful description of Offred's confinement does not leave the reader altogether clueless as regards the outside world. For instance, something of little importance like the composition of Offred's meals teaches us about the rationing (or lack thereof) situation in Gilead. One evidently has in mind *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* drastic restrictions on food, the famous reduction to twenty grams of chocolate a week which becomes a raise in doublespeak, but nothing of the sort is to be found in Offred's account. The reader may be given a slight hint when the chicken Offred brings home for dinner is described as "scrawny"¹⁰⁴, and it is said that Handmaids are given the best to make sure they remain healthy, so one could imagine things are different for other members of society. But overall, food does not seem to receive the same treatment as in other dystopias, which perhaps drew inspiration from the Soviet regime under Stalin, where starvation led to the death of millions¹⁰⁵.

Of course, the alleged luxury of Offred's meal is a mockery in itself, a reflection of the protagonist in a way: the eggs represent fertility and Offred's reduction to her reproductive functions, and the canned pears also evoke the narrator, who feels she is

¹⁰¹ For example: chapter XIV, p. 277 (Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*). The Salvagings are public, televised executions.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 79.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 290. Particution is a ritual during which Handmaids are made to lynch a man who has been found guilty of an offense (although in the only example we see in the book, it is said that the man is actually innocent).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁵ Here, one might especially look at dystopias written by Eastern authors, *Chocolate* (Alexander Rodionov, 1932) being a case in point.

“the shape of a pear”¹⁰⁶. The latter is also a clear example of Offred’s misrepresentation of her own self, as her body is often the object of unusual comparisons¹⁰⁷. But more will be said about this in a later subpart.

Small things, then, come to take on a symbolic meaning and enlighten the reader as to the situation. In fact, the house of the Commander works a lot like a microcosm of Gilead, with segregated spaces and hierarchical statuses. It enables the reader to see all of the relations of power as they function in the dystopian society. For the narrator’s present life to be largely restricted to the house is also emblematic of gender prejudices, which have claimed for centuries that it is where a woman belongs. ‘Present life’ is a specification we need to make, because Offred’s narrative does not limit itself to the present: as the story unfolds, we find that there are multiple escapes from her prison, both spiritual and sensual.

Indeed, *The Handmaid’s Tale* provides us with accumulations of descriptions, many of which rely on the senses. Smell is especially present throughout the novel, at times agreeable as it enables Offred to flee her reality (for instance, when she fantasizes about the way Nick would smell “tanned skin, moist in the sun, filmed with smoke”¹⁰⁸) but far more frequently unpleasant (“the smell is of our own flesh [...] sweat and a tinge of iron, from the blood on the sheet”¹⁰⁹, or more obviously when Moira relates her attempt to escape Gilead: “in a truck full of chickens [...] I almost puked from the smell”¹¹⁰). The insistence on stench contributes to the creation of an oppressive atmosphere, a contrast with the degree of freedom that Offred experiences through her senses, something she owns and which cannot be taken away. Angela Carter, one of Atwood’s most notable influences, also relied on the sense of smell to induce claustrophobia in her dystopian fiction *Passion of New Eve*¹¹¹, whose heroine is for a time forced to live amongst pigs she is forbidden to wash.

An emphasis on the senses as well as on the narrator’s everyday activities is, as we have demonstrated, at the core of the renewed perception of Atwood’s novel, but we are yet to examine an equally important subject. We have said a little about how Offred (and through her eyes, the reader) perceives the world, and we must now address how

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁷ For example: “I too am dry and white, hard, granular; it’s like running my hand over a plateful of dried rice; it’s like snow.” *Ibid*, p. 114.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 133.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 259.

¹¹¹ Carter, Angela. *The Passion of New Eve*. 1977. Virago Modern Classics 1982.

she perceives herself. It goes without saying that Offred, like all dystopian protagonists, has been profoundly altered by her oppressive society. It is time for us to make a closer examination of our ambiguous, alienated protagonist.

3. An Alienated Narrator

The way in which Offred sees herself is essential to the reader's comprehension of the character, if we follow what we have said regarding guided perception. As we have also pointed out before in this paper, Offred does not reveal herself all at once, the reader is instead left with scattered pieces of information that they must put together. For instance, the Marthas' conversations about Offred which she overhears as well as the recollections of Offred's former life contribute to her characterization. Atwood is therefore consistent in the relation between her narrator and her narrative: both are "reconstruction[s]"¹¹².

The first time that the narrator runs into a mirror, as early as the second chapter, what she sees is "a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak"¹¹³. It is difficult for Offred to view herself as a real person, which makes sense in a setting where reality itself has been overturned by the absurdity of totalitarianism. It also indicates that, regardless of how long the regime of Gilead has been in power (which is still very obscure at this stage) the new norm still strikes Offred as somewhat ridiculous, her "red cloak" is still unfamiliar though the novel later confirms she would find jeans and short skirts quite as shocking¹¹⁴. Both the world and her own self have become difficult to grasp, for Offred, as both have been deprived of their past identities. A dystopia more often than not presents us with characters who have lost essential things, and this is certainly the case of Offred, who has lost control over her own body, freedom of expression, and even her name, the most basic marker of identity.

3.1. An Anonymous Narrator

The question that all dystopian authors must address, as does Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is how a human being continues to exist in a world that

¹¹² Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹¹⁴ For example: when she runs into Japanese tourists: "We are fascinated but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this." *Ibid*, p. 38.

systematically strips individuals of human characteristics, a world where their past freedoms, provided they had any, have become fantasies.

The first thing we can note about Offred in particular, is her anonymity: she has been swallowed by the system and her identity has disappeared. It is no coincidence that Offred's name, though it plays a central part in her struggle to reassert her sense of self, is never revealed to the reader. Though they may easily deduce it from the exchange of names that closes the first chapter of the novel, there is a point to this anonymity. To begin with, it is interesting as regards the reader's relation to the dystopia: if the narrator is given no name, she could be anyone. This possible interpretation elevates Offred from a single woman to a representative of her gender: she becomes a synecdoche, enduring the plight of all women in a misogynistic society.

This namelessness also establishes a parallel between Offred and the reader, provided we consider they are the one to whom the narrative is addressed, this elusive "you" which "can mean thousands" and is "without a name"¹¹⁵. Of course, this absence of names, which in the case of Handmaids have been replaced by patronymics that identify them according to the Commander they are assigned to ('Offred' literally meaning 'Of Fred'), is part of the dehumanizing force of the dystopian state which we have already evoked. Like the people of Zamyatin's *We*, individuals become numbers and lose whatever is irreplaceable or unique about their identities. We may also conjecture that Atwood chose the name 'Offred' because of its resemblance to the past participle 'offered', which symbolizes the narrator's position in the novel, compelled to be always at the service of others.

Thus, the only name we are given for our narrator is not really a name at all. Instead, it is reductive, it defines her only as a (man's) property. This seems rather pessimistic yet one must not overlook this other name, though Atwood is careful to maintain the mystery that surrounds it, the one that "nobody uses [...] because it's forbidden"¹¹⁶. The narrator's *real* name (June, the reader picks up from the clues) allows some room for hope, in the narrative, it is "an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past"¹¹⁷.

Many critics have found *The Handmaid's Tale* to be leaning towards the anti-utopian pole, that is not the same as dystopia but a critique of utopia, giving way to the

¹¹⁵ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 49-50.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 94.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*.

dangerous belief that the world as it is now may not be improved by utopian thought which will only lead to totalitarian horizons¹¹⁸. However accurate this assessment might be, one may point out that the true name of the narrator, which though it is hidden has not been forgotten, certainly points to a more optimistic tone. When the narrator shares her name with other women, at the beginning of the novel, the reader has yet no means to know which one is hers. It may not be coincidental that the last name to be ruled out as belonging to the narrator is “Dolores”, which would have certainly been fitting to Offred’s story as well, an emblem for the suffering she and all women must endure in Gilead. “June”, on the other hand, is more hopeful, is associated with the cycle of seasons, with renewal, perhaps even if we stretch the image further, with resurrection.

3.2. Alienated Bodies

Though the name “June” may represent some degree of hope, Offred’s situation as a Handmaid in the Commander’s house remains quite sinister. Her relation to her own self is made complicated by the fact that she can no longer claim ownership over it. This is perhaps why we learn so little about who she is in the present-tense Gilead timeline, because Offred is no longer anything she was, prior to the instalment of the regime. She is no longer a wife or a mother, but “a national resource”¹¹⁹. It is not surprising that, as a result, Offred’s body should come to feel like a tool whose purpose is not to serve her but the state, illustrating the connection between humans and machines that is at the roots of dystopia but, more specifically, the dissociation that frequently follows sexual abuse¹²⁰.

On analyzing the relation to the body in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, one immediately remarks that it is considered separate from the self: the time when Offred thought of her body as “an implement for the accomplishment of [her] will”¹²¹ is far behind. Instead, the images that Offred most often uses to describe herself recall transparency, intangibility (a cloud, smoke, even cotton candy¹²²). It is meant to illustrate both the weakness of her body in doing anything concrete to escape the torments she suffers from and her failure to relate to it, to appropriate it. Sleeping, eating and having sex

¹¹⁸ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

¹¹⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹²⁰ <https://www.rainn.org/articles/dissociation>, date of access 06/11/2017.

¹²¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹²² *Ibid*, p. 84, 95 and 148.

have become mechanized tasks Offred must fulfill, but in the process there is no pleasure or even an actual connection with what her body performs. Touching herself is to Offred “like running [her] hand over a plateful of dried rice [...] There’s something dead about it, something deserted”¹²³. The image is both brutal and effective, translating the impossibility to reconcile oneself with one’s body under such circumstances of abuse.

In fact, the body in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is never described as a whole, but as individual parts, restricted to their specific functions: the Handmaids are “two-legged wombs”¹²⁴, and during medical examinations the doctors do not see their faces, “a torso only”¹²⁵. More strikingly, there is the image of the feet, which recurs in the novel, first when Moira is tortured by the Aunts and later when Offred is fired from her job and feels as if someone had “cut off [her] feet”¹²⁶. Perhaps Atwood was thinking of the excruciating practice of foot-binding which Chinese women endured for centuries: this is, after all, a book which inscribes itself not only into the legacy of dystopian fiction but that of women’s struggle against oppression. What is certain is that the images of body parts rather than a whole body express the narrator’s physical alienation. Interestingly, the image of dismemberment is also applied to her narrative: Offred speaks of “amputated speech” and later of her “limping and mutilated story”¹²⁷. This is appropriate as Atwood uses literary devices¹²⁸ so that the very form of her novel will evoke dismemberment. A parallel is established once more between narrator and narrative: Offred’s story is a reflection of her fragmented self, a fragmentation which, as we have said, is at least partly the result of her sexual enslavement.

One of the things which the reader must find most surprising in this novel is that neither Offred nor any other character ever seems willing to acknowledge the ignominious Ceremonies as rape. On the contrary, women’s choice in becoming Handmaids is emphasized, though from what we understand, the only other option that they were given was being sent to the Colonies, which appear to be little different from

¹²³ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 146.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 70.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 188.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 211 and 279.

¹²⁸ For instance, we can think of the discontinuity between past and present, the ambiguity which surrounds the fate of numerous characters such as Moira, Luke, Offred’s daughter and Offred herself, and which might give the reader the impression that a piece of the narrative is missing, that it is incomplete.

death camps. Choosing rape over death does not make the act consensual, and indeed, Offred reacts to the Ceremony precisely as one typically reacts to sexual assault, that is by fully detaching herself from her body, by not even acknowledging that she is part of what is going on: “the Commander is fucking [...] the lower part of my body”, she tells us, “only one is involved”¹²⁹. What is more ambiguous, is the revelation that Offred’s sense of alienation towards her body began before Gilead was fully installed. When she and her husband Luke have sex, after she has been fired and lost her financial autonomy, Offred feels that “love [is] going forward without [her]”¹³⁰, which stresses the impossibility of loving when both parties are not on equal grounds. Even when the situation is not assault, it is no longer making love. Already, in the earliest stages of Offred’s loss of freedom, she has become a victim, she is no longer an actor in her own life, but something passive, with no power over her fate and, indeed, without a voice.

3.4. A Speechless Narrator

Speech, too, in Atwood’s novel, has become regulated: Handmaids are not to speak unless spoken to¹³¹ and when they do speak, their words are drained of meaning, are but an echo of the regime’s indoctrination. This is, obviously, something essential in most dystopias: as Raffaella Baccolini puts it: “the dystopian protagonist”, before their “reappropriation of language”, are left speechless, as they only know how to speak “empty propaganda”¹³². To illustrate this, we might think of the exchange between Offred and Ofglen in chapter four: “‘Blessed be the fruit,’ she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. ‘May the Lord open,’ I answer, the accepted response”¹³³. Of course, the Handmaids must be cautious around each other, for any sign of disloyalty to the regime would be fatal if reported. However, it is suggested that this is not the only reason, that Offred is genuinely beginning to use Gilead’s terms, even in what is left of her private sphere, in her narrative. Coveting Janine’s pregnancy, at the market, she believes that “we too [the other Handmaids] can be *saved*”¹³⁴. Several times, she refers to women’s situation in Gilead as protection, which further demonstrates that the words of the regime have begun to take root inside of her, somewhat adding to the

¹²⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 191.

¹³¹ We will examine Gilead’s emphasis on silencing women in the second part of this paper.

¹³² Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, “Dystopia and Histories”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹³³ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 36 (my emphasis).

veracity of her story. Indeed, we may conjecture that, having lived for some years in Gilead, it is likely that Offred's conditioning would have had some impact, that she would find it difficult to express herself otherwise. As a result, evidence of her indoctrination makes her narrative more plausible.

The difference between fact and fiction, in Atwood's novel, or in other words between stories and reality, is both crucial and confusing. For instance, if we think of the passage where Offred claims: "It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling"¹³⁵, we have a clear example of the confused status of Offred's narrative. If we imagine it is the fictional quality of Offred's story that is being debated in this quotation, it becomes important to consider the duality between textual and external worlds which Atwood's novel poses. According to the fiction theories we have already discussed, the relation between the story-world and the reader's is very strong, but here things are taken even further: the very limit between the two becomes blurred.

That Offred's account is and is not a story is one of the numerous paradoxes to be found in this novel. Another is that, as Offred is deprived of speech, it might strike us as particularly shocking that her narrative is precisely an oral tale¹³⁶.

Given the numerous parallels between story and storyteller, it might be relevant for us to say a few words about the form of Offred's tale: the style, as we have pointed out, is characterized by fragmentation, especially through constant jumps from present to past, which gives an impression of full immersion into Offred's thoughts. This is, in fact, what the reader first suspects to be the nature of her narrative, as Offred describes it as a story she is telling "in [her] head, as [she] go[es] along"¹³⁷. "Tell", one will note, is the term she uses, and not write. Indeed, before the "Historical Notes", there is no hint that Offred's story is actually being recorded in any way. It is easy to understand why, as Atwood would no doubt spoil the dénouement of her novel by revealing that Offred will acquire the means to transmit this story, in the form of "thirty tape cassettes"¹³⁸. The latter are said not to have been arranged in any order, still following the motif of fragmentation, nor was the story given a title: Offred's narrative, just like its author, is anonymous. Moreover, both of them are, as Offred calls them, reconstructions. The story, we learn, has been reconstituted retrospectively, and

¹³⁵ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

¹³⁶ "Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with" *ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 49.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 313.

Offred, too, is not a whole but a divided being: the pieces of her identity must be assembled through a process of recollection, through an active use of memory.

4. Reconstruction and Memory

We have already established a link between Offred's reconstructed narrative and the construction of worlds in (science) fiction. Yet we may also point out that, by presenting the reader with a narrator who is so difficult to grasp, by leaving room for mystery¹³⁹, Atwood leads the reader to participate in the tale: they themselves become an agent in the making of an imaginary world, and in the reconstruction of Offred's story. The role of the reader was actually emphasized by philosopher David Lewis¹⁴⁰, who claimed the readers as well as the author participated in the construction of fictional worlds through make-believe¹⁴¹. If Atwood leaves many questions unanswered, the reader must themselves work out a solution: to borrow the words of Janet Horowitz Murray, they not only suspend their disbelief but "actively create belief"¹⁴².

We may argue this process of making the reader take part in creating the story-world is actually inherent to the genres of science fiction and dystopia, especially if we keep in mind Tom Moylan's comparison with the detective story. The reader is immersed in an unfamiliar world and they must work on a mental representation that will be as complete as possible. Moreover, as we have already pointed out that Offred's story is addressed to "you", the reader's participation, his attempts to fill the ambiguities of Atwood's novel, may truly feel like entering a dialogue with the protagonist. Yet in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the reader must not only build an image of the story-world, they must also constantly establish whether a scene is taking place in the past or in the present. It is also in this temporal sense that Offred's story is a reconstruction.

¹³⁹ Many questions are left unanswered: what will happen to Offred at the end of the novel? Is Nick an Eye or an agent of the Mayday underground? Is Offred's family still alive? Etc.

¹⁴⁰ Lewis was the one to establish a connection between possible worlds and fiction theory in his article "Truth in Fiction", published in 1968.

¹⁴¹ Lewis, David. *Philosophical Papers*, Volume I. Oxford University Press 1983, p. 276.

¹⁴² Murray, Janet Horowitz. *Hamlet in the Holodeck, The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. MIT Press 1998, p. 110.

4.1. A Torn Narrator: Between Present and Past

Offred apologizes to the reader for being “a refugee from the past”, who “wander[s] back”, who is only “a blank, here, between parentheses”¹⁴³. It is suitable that the image refers directly to speech, for the statement applies to Atwood’s novel as a whole, which covers about as much of Offred’s present life as it does her past: thus, we are presented with three different narratives. Offred at the Commander’s house, her training at the Red Centre, and her life as an emancipated woman, prior to Gilead. Of these three stories, only the second one will get a resolution: we will know what happens to Moira, the result of her escape from the Red Centre, but not what has become of Offred’s family nor what will become of her, at the end of the novel.

The structure itself of the novel is interesting in terms of temporality. It is divided into fifteen parts and forty-six chapters, and while typically, the name of the parts set during the day¹⁴⁴ focus on a specific event¹⁴⁵, those that take place at night have a recurring title¹⁴⁶, which opens and closes the novel. As a matter of fact, none of those titles focus on an event of Offred’s past life, however important it is to the narrative, considering that one of Offred’s main occupations when she is by herself consists in remembering (described here as a deliberate and active process).

That the narrator is truly torn between those timelines is indicated by abrupt shifts to the past, which sometimes are also related in the present tense, stressing the immediacy with which Offred relives them. From the opening scene of the novel (which is set at the Red Centre and is therefore a flashback), it is clear that Offred’s relation to the past is powerful: “once”, “formerly,” “still in place”¹⁴⁷ are indicators that a time well-remembered by the narrator is now gone, that something has changed irrevocably. Immediate also is the discovery that the protagonist still lives partly in the past: “the music” that belongs to a former time “linger[s]”¹⁴⁸, though Offred alone can hear it now. Flashbacks are frequently inserted with little introduction if any. For instance, we can think of how the narrative moves from the present to the past in a same sentence: “We wait, the clock in the hall ticks, Serena lights another cigarette, I

¹⁴³ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 240.

¹⁴⁴ With the exception of Jezebel’s, the visit to the club being set at night (*ibid*, p. 241-267).

¹⁴⁵ For example: II. Shopping, V. Nap, VIII. Birth Day (*ibid*).

¹⁴⁶ Parts I, III, VII, IX, XI, XIII and XV are called “Night”.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 1, opening paragraph.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

get into the car”¹⁴⁹, the last part referring to Offred’s failed attempt to flee Gilead with her family.

That is not to say that the chronology of the narrative is chaotic: rather, it is deliberately de-structured, to exemplify Offred’s inextricable connection to the past. The flashbacks are, on the whole, easy enough to identify for an attentive reader, as they feature direct speech without inverted commas, and often interventions from the narrator to remind us that the scene is set in the past¹⁵⁰. Most notably, it is from the past that we learn most of what we know about Offred, of her life as a mother, a wife, and a college student. Nevertheless, much about who Offred was remains vague: one does not know what she studied (though the references to experiments on rats¹⁵¹ may hint at psychology or biology) and we find out little about her family life (her daughter is kept especially mysterious, as she is only ever referred to as “she”). Perhaps this suggests that what matters is not the information which the reader learns about the protagonist, but what those memories bring to the narrator: that is, a temporary escape from Gilead. Through them, Offred recalls to life things that are forbidden, she does not endure the memories passively but summons them, thus reclaiming some sense of freedom and identity.

4.2. Memory and Dystopia

Memory in dystopia is often crucial in the protagonist’s awakening and gradual opposition to the regime. In her study of the genre, Erika Gottlieb asserts that reconstructing the past is, in itself, an act of resistance, as “dystopian regimes attempt to erase/control history”, thus the “pursuit of individual memory” is an important step in retrieving “the private self”¹⁵². Offred, in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (much like Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), through her recollections, dissociates herself from Gilead and its rewriting of reality, she breaks from its omnipresence. Memory is therefore, in itself, subversive.

It is also described as an intimate process: “Not here and now. Not where people are looking”¹⁵³. Offred refrains from giving in to her memories in public places, which is an instance of the cautiousness she must show around others, even in her own head.

¹⁴⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹⁵⁰ For example: “What day was it?”, “How old was I?” *Ibid*, p. 47-48.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 79-80.

¹⁵² Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

¹⁵³ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

Due to the connection between memory and freedom, the fallibility of memory is naturally dealt with, as it is in Orwell's dystopia¹⁵⁴. Offred cannot remember exactly what her loved ones looked like, nor what she looked like, before Gilead. Those memories are essential, just as Offred's true name, inasmuch as they are a counter-narrative to the regime's official truth. Perhaps even more importantly, they are all the evidence that is left of Offred's former identity: she knows that there is more to a woman's life than childbearing, she has experienced the infinity of choices of her former liberated life. There lies her power to resist the regime's attempts to dehumanize her, to define her strictly according to the male Commander whom she must serve. Because she has known freedom in the past, Offred knows she is, or was, more than just "a usable body"¹⁵⁵.

However, memory is also a source of suffering, and sometimes beyond Offred's control, in the form of dreams or of "attacks from the past"¹⁵⁶. One must keep in mind that Offred is walking the same streets, visiting the same places she knew before Gilead and, under this light, the memories are painful, as they attest to the absurdity of Offred's present life.

4.3. The Absurdity of Gilead, through the Prism of the Past

As we have said earlier, it is not unusual for dystopian protagonists to have been born prior to the instalment of the regime and to keep a vague remembrance of different times, but this is especially emphasized in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which the time of former freedoms is not even a distant past. Everyone amongst the victims and the elect remembers the previous norms, remembers that women were once accepted members of society. This enables Atwood to raise an interesting question: how can women be expected to become defamiliarized with their civil rights, how will anyone at all go along with the new regime's standards?

The elite's attitude in particular is dismaying, for they too experience the absurdity of the radical changes in society. One would think the power they exert must strike

¹⁵⁴ In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Party uses the past to control the present, destroying private records of people's lives so that they may freely rewrite history. As a result, individual memory is a precious tool of resistance, but Winston cannot remember very well how the Party seized power and imposed its authority. There is a tension between how important memory is and how fragile it is.

¹⁵⁵ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 172.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 62.

them as unjustified, though their willingness to forget what was once common knowledge is baffling: for instance, when Offred offers to write something down, in the Commander's office, and he "hesitates at this novel ideal. Possibly he doesn't remember I can"¹⁵⁷. The proximity of the old normality makes it necessary for the inhabitants of Gilead, and especially the elect, to practice what Orwell has made famously known as doublethink. To go back to Denis Mellier and his theory on the construction of science fiction worlds, we see that here, Gilead is viewed in opposition to the 'real world' not only by the readers but by the characters. For the elite, the solution is to "censor any knowledge which might weaken the coherence of [the elite's] world by establishing a tension with another world" that must be denied for the "safeguard of the future"¹⁵⁸.

It is clear that the tension between Gilead and the reader's world is what Atwood is trying to emphasize: by constantly using the past as a contrast with Offred's current situation, she stresses the ridiculous backwardness of Gilead. In his article, Mellier takes the example of *La planète des singes*¹⁵⁹ when he explains that the duality between the constructed science fiction world and that of a fictional past (which corresponds to the reader's present) creates a conflict that appears irreconcilable. In the case of Atwood's dystopia, we might argue that this conflict is precisely the point: that Atwood created Offred's world precisely so that its relation to the reader's would feel intolerable. This is also a way for Atwood's warning to make an impact on her readers: by making Offred's past very similar to that of anyone living in the 1980s, she makes it feel as though those very liberties might be taken away in the foreseeable future.

This is precisely how dystopia functions, expressing a warning through the creation of an anamorphic world, a hypothetical future in which society will be distorted though, unfortunately, not quite beyond recognition. In the visual arts¹⁶⁰, the term 'anamorphosis' refers to a "distorted projection or drawing which appears normal when viewed from a particular point or with a suitable mirror or lens"¹⁶¹. We see that

¹⁵⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

¹⁵⁸ Mellier, Denis. « D'une manière l'autre de faire des mondes : science-fiction et savoirs de la fiction », *art. cit.*, paragraph 23 (my translation).

¹⁵⁹ Boule, Pierre. *La planète des singes*. 1963. Pocket 2001.

¹⁶⁰ The two most famous examples of anamorphosis in the visual arts are "Las Meninas" by Diego Velazquez (1656-1657) and "The Ambassadors" by Hans Holbein (1533). They can be viewed here: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hans-holbein-the-younger-the-ambassadors> and here <https://www.diegovelazquez.org/Las-Meninas-Detail-1-1656-57.html>, date of access 26/03/2018.

¹⁶¹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/anamorphosis>, date of access 26/03/2018.

the importance of the spectator's gaze is emphasized. In literature, according to Professor Alexis Yannopoulos, anamorphosis is "deeply connected to a questioning of a certain view of the world"¹⁶² and requires a "shift of perspective" to be fully appreciated. Therefore, it is logical that it should be at the heart of temporality in dystopia and science fiction in general, if indeed they present distorted futures or "temporal aberrations"¹⁶³. Science fictional worlds, Yannopoulos argues, always establish a dialogue with the society in which they were created¹⁶⁴, which means that although the reader is meant to be estranged from the story-world¹⁶⁵, other elements will be linked with their own reality, thus requiring for their perspective to be flexible. The "Historical Notes" are especially noteworthy in this respect, as they are set in a remote future but do not fail to remind the reader of the everyday misogyny they may easily recognize in the present¹⁶⁶.

As regards Offred's story, the coexistence of two timelines, that is the traces of the time before that remain in Gilead, emerge as peculiar inconsistencies: they feel anachronistic. We may think, for example, of the "football stadium [...] where they hold the Men's Salvagings" that is to say, televised executions, "[a]s well as the football games." Offred continues, "[t]hey still have those"¹⁶⁷. By connecting the antagonistic images of recreation and execution, Atwood strengthens the process of defamiliarization which we have already mentioned, and she brings into focus the absurdity of totalitarianism. There is another example of this process, perhaps more poignant, when Offred sees a dishtowel and reflects that they are "the same as they always were. Sometimes these flashes of normality come at me [...] like ambushes"¹⁶⁸. Here Atwood chooses an item anyone can find in their houses, so as to make Offred's situation uncomfortably relatable. The author reinforces the parallel between Offred

¹⁶² Yannopoulos, Alexis. *Archéologies du futur : anamorphoses et utopies dans l'œuvre d'Angélica Gorodischer*. Thèse de doctorat soutenue le 13 décembre 2014 à l'Université Toulouse le Mirail, p. 39 (my translation). It can be accessed here: <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01140865/>, date of access 27/0/2018.

¹⁶³ Saint-Gelais, Richard. « Temporalités de la science-fiction » *ReS Futurae* [En ligne], 2 | 2013. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/resf/271>, date of access 26/03/2018.

¹⁶⁴ Alexis Yannopoulos *Archéologies du futur : anamorphoses et utopies dans l'œuvre d'Angélica Gorodischer*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁶⁵ Through the creation of "Novums", the science fiction reader will experience a "cognitive estrangement", that is to say that they will be faced with a place that will follow different rules than their empirical environment (Darko Suvin, *Pour une poétique de la science-fiction*, *op. cit.*, p. 2).

¹⁶⁶ More will be said about this at the end of our second part.

¹⁶⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 58.

and the reader by bringing Offred's situation in Gilead in contrast with a time that very much resembles the one in which the reader lives. It goes without saying that, if the protagonist's past feels close to the reader's present, her present will inevitably be associated with their future¹⁶⁹.

In the end, we have seen that Atwood's narrator plays an essential role in the reader's appreciation of the novel, as she is their gateway into the story-world. We have attempted to demonstrate that Offred fully embraces the typical features of a dystopian protagonist, but also that her unreliability always leads the reader to question the events she describes in Gilead, before finally discussing her mental and physical alienation. Through the use of anamorphosis which we have just studied and the fiction theories of possible worlds and that of Denis Mellier¹⁷⁰, Offred's tale, which the reader remembers to be a reconstruction, may well come to feel to them not like an imaginary world, but rather like a nightmarish version of their own.

It is, at least in part, the aim of Atwood's novel, to make her readers feel as if Gilead might actually happen: after all, there is nothing in it that "human beings [have] not already done in some other place or time."¹⁷¹ And certainly, women have experienced all kinds of oppression in history, bearing at times little difference with the misogyny of Gilead. By making women the enslaved lot of her dystopia, Atwood engages on the controversy of gender relations and gender equality which is still raging in most parts of the world. It is time for this dissertation to address it.

¹⁶⁹ Saint-Gelais speaks of "intertwined temporalities" (« un entrecroisement de [...] temporalités » in the original text), applying the term to science fiction worlds in general (Richard Saint-Gelais, « Temporalités de la science-fiction », *art. cit.*)

¹⁷⁰ The fictional world of the science fiction novel is meant to make sense of the real world in which it was written. Mellier, Denis. « D'une manière l'autre de faire des mondes : science-fiction et savoirs de la fiction », *art. cit.*

¹⁷¹ Margaret Atwood, about *The Handmaid's Tale*:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/20/Handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood>, date of access 25/11/2017.

II – Genders in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Gilead's Enslaved Population

“Was not the whole world a vast prison and women born slaves?”¹⁷²

Any dystopian regime relies upon the enslavement of a large part of the population, as a direct result of the category (be it race, social class or gender) in which they were born. In the second part of the twentieth century, as the number of female authors increased in the realm of science and speculative fiction¹⁷³, the issue of women's rights was frequently incorporated into the dystopian tradition¹⁷⁴. Famous writers such as Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter¹⁷⁵ and Octavia Butler¹⁷⁶, whose fiction questioned prejudice and gender roles¹⁷⁷, took on a heavy historical baggage worth about three thousand years of misogyny. Moreover, they faced the problem of publishing their work in what remained a dominantly male culture.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood draws inspiration both from the well-known patterns of dystopian regimes and from the patriarchal models that society has followed for millennia. Nor can we say that her novel limits itself to a superficial depiction of a battle of the sexes: Atwood does not, for instance, victimize all women while demonizing men. Her portrayal of genders is, first and foremost, human¹⁷⁸, which is essential in the dehumanizing context of a dystopia and in the realistic depiction of interactions between men and women. In this part, we will examine the

¹⁷² Wollstonecraft, Mary. *Maria: Or the Wrongs of Woman*. 1798. Independently Published 2017, p. 79.

¹⁷³ The Oxford dictionary defines speculative fiction as “A genre of fiction that encompasses works in which the setting is other than the real world, involving supernatural, futuristic, or other imagined elements.” https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/speculative_fiction, date of access 26/11/2017.

¹⁷⁴ “The late 1960s witnessed the publication of much dystopian writings by women” Ildney Cavalcanti, “The Writing of Utopia and the Feminist Critical Dystopia”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons, op. cit.*, p. 49.

¹⁷⁵ Angela Carter (1940-1992).

¹⁷⁶ Octavia Butler (1947-2006) is the author of the *Earthseed* series (1993), whose female protagonist becomes the leader of a new religion.

¹⁷⁷ *Passion of New Eve* (Angela Carter, 1977) is especially interesting as regards gender, as it features a male protagonist turned into a woman.

¹⁷⁸ Human in the sense that both men and women are flawed and suffer from Gilead. Even the male oppressors are not dehumanized, as we will see in more details in II – 2.2. **The Men of Gilead**.

extent to which Atwood succeeds in this dynamic, beginning with the implementation of misogynistic legislation in Gilead: in other words, we will see how Atwood reconstructs the reader's world in terms of women's rights (or lack thereof).

1. Codified Misogyny

In this subpart, we shall briefly discuss the context in which Atwood created Gilead and try to demonstrate that her dystopian story-world is not actually an invention. As Atwood herself pointed out, she only had to pick from existing strands of misogyny¹⁷⁹ and use them for the legislation of her novel. That is to say that the sexist behavior depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* is deeply rooted in human history, and that Gilead is therefore not an imaginary construction but a misogynistic reconstruction of society.

1.1. A Misogynistic Reconstruction of Society

It is important to point out that Atwood's regime is based on existing biases, if indeed dystopia may be compared to a magnifying glass, enabling its readers to see more plainly the defects of a society. Those that are specifically pinpointed in *The Handmaid's Tale* stem from the persistent misogyny in Western culture, with an important stress on fundamentalism. This is understandable, as Atwood wrote her novel in the middle of what scholar Jack Holland calls a "misogynistic backlash"¹⁸⁰. The Religious Right was gaining ground in the realm of politics, women were being blamed for having "fewer children but more sex"¹⁸¹, causing a call for the promotion of conservative family values and the rise of the pro-life movement, which questioned women's autonomy over their own bodies. These are issues which are still raging today in many parts of the Western world, though in the mid-1980s, it seemed difficult to determine where the dangers of fundamentalism would end. As Holland tells us, there were "attacks on family planning clinics", and even cases of murder on doctors who practiced abortion¹⁸². It is in this very real atmosphere of religious radicalism that Atwood created Gilead.

To show that her story-world is indeed a misogynistic reconstruction of society, relying on forms of sexism that have existed throughout history, we will look at

¹⁷⁹ Tolan, Fiona. *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Costerus New Series 2007. Quoting Atwood about *HT*, p. 292: "There's nothing in it that we as a species haven't done".

¹⁸⁰ Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny*, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 52.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, p. 245.

passages in *The Handmaid's Tale* in which Atwood directly or implicitly criticizes the prejudices of her own society.

In a book review¹⁸³ published by *The New York Times* in 1986, Mary McCarthy blames Atwood for failing to convey the proper fear that is essential to a dystopia, that is for failing to convince her readers that her dystopian society is likely to happen if changes are not implemented in their current society. “Still, even when I try, in the light of these palely lurid pages, to take the Moral Majority seriously, no shiver of recognition ensues. I just can't see the intolerance of the far right [...] leading to a super-biblical puritanism by which procreation will be insisted on and reading of any kind banned.” This makes a most interesting contrast with the women's marches that followed Donald Trump's election, in which some women carried posters that read: “Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again”¹⁸⁴. Though even if we disregard those latest developments, we can point out that, however important it is that a dystopia establishes a frightful future which is considered plausible by its readers, it is by no means the sole criterion according to which one should evaluate a dystopia. By doing so, we might even argue that McCarthy is somewhat missing the point¹⁸⁵. *The Handmaid's Tale* is not only about what could happen but about what has happened, and what is currently happening.

There is a tone of anticipation to Atwood's novel as there is to most dystopias, but it is by no means the most striking feature of her message. What disturbs and marks the reader most profoundly, is what Gilead has in common with their own society, the latent misogyny which they are accustomed to ignoring. The fact is that sexist stereotypes, having been around for the main part of human history, are so deeply ingrained in our culture that they have become inconspicuous¹⁸⁶. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood restores their visibility: makes them, even for the most reluctant of readers, impossible to miss. As a result, it is difficult to agree with McCarthy that Atwood's world triggers “no shiver of recognition”. Just as it is the case in *La planète*

¹⁸³ <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/26/specials/mccarthy-atwood.html?mcubz=3>, date of access 01/12/2017

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.bustle.com/p/these-margaret-atwood-signs-at-the-womens-march-will-give-you-the-chills-32074>, date of access 01/12/2017.

¹⁸⁵ One may also keep in mind that: « [la science-fiction] ne devrait pas être traitée en prophétesse : ni être portée sur le trône quand elle prédit juste, ni être décapitée quand elle se trompe. » Darko Suvin, *Pour une poétique de la science-fiction*, op. cit., p. 35.

¹⁸⁶ Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny*, op. cit., p. 271.

*des singes*¹⁸⁷, *The Handmaid's Tale* confronts the reader with the ruins of their own world, which likewise has fallen into a nightmare as a result of very real prejudices that have influenced women's lives for millennia, most often for the worse.

The most remarkable example of this connection between Atwood's story-world and the reader's actual one may be the shaming of women who endure sexual assault¹⁸⁸. We may illustrate it with the striking testimonies at the Red Centre, in which women are publicly blamed for their own rapes¹⁸⁹. Though rape survivors in the real world may not be given to hear such open accusations, at least in Western societies, one may argue that they are in many cases made to feel responsible for what has happened, either as a result of their provocative attitude or lack of caution. The "Testifying" scene is meant to be read with a sense of frightful recognition: the fact that forty percent of the French population believe a woman is partially responsible for being raped if she has behaved provocatively in a public place, and that twenty-seven percent would say so of a woman who was wearing "sexy" clothes¹⁹⁰, is a clear indication that rape culture remains an issue today, and it was most certainly one when Atwood wrote her novel. Rape-shaming is therefore an existing prejudice which Atwood merely intensifies.

The same could be said of women's role as childbearing figures, or of the absurdity of their having a career. One may think that these things are not being said to women openly, but it would be harder to argue it is not being said to them constantly, in a variety of implicit ways. This is precisely why, in Atwood's novel, their being fired out of nowhere makes an absurd sort of sense: "It's outrageous," one woman said, but without belief. What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it"¹⁹¹? That is to say that women have incorporated sexist prejudice to such an extent that for men to strip them of their rights out of the blue does not truly feel "outrageous", as it should. On the contrary, on some level, it feels legitimate, as if it were what women deserved.

There is no room, in this paper, to name every example of Gilead's misogyny, but it is important to bear in mind that its roots are borrowed directly from Atwood's

¹⁸⁷ As we have already mentioned, it is the example picked by Denis Mellier when he explains the dual relation between the science fiction world and the real one. Denis Mellier, « D'une manière l'autre de faire des mondes : science-fiction et savoirs de la fiction », *art. cit.*

¹⁸⁸ "Such *things* do not happen to nice women" Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 65.

¹⁸⁹ "[W]hose fault was it? [...] *Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison." *Ibid*, p. 81-82.

¹⁹⁰ <http://www.france24.com/fr/20160302-sondage-ipsos-stereotypes-viol-violences-sexuelles-france>, date of access 02/12/2017.

¹⁹¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 186.

society and, therefore, that one should be afraid, when reading this novel, perhaps not that Gilead will happen, but that some of it is already happening. In this sense, *The Handmaid's Tale* perfectly fulfills its dystopian purpose, which is to “create societies significantly worse than the society of the reader, but uncomfortably close to it”¹⁹².

1.2. Misogyny and Religion

Another source of inspiration for Gilead's misogyny is, most obviously, the Bible, fundamentalism being at the core of the regime's structure and alleged ideology. Though Gilead's relation to Christianity is not as simple as meets the eye, we will return to its ambiguity later in this dissertation¹⁹³. For the moment, let us only be concerned with the links between religious fanaticism and the enslavement of women. As we have said earlier when we discussed the dehumanization of dystopian protagonists, it is frequent for the characters of such stories to be reduced solely to whatever service they provide the state with, and it is certainly the case of women, in Atwood's novel, who are divided into specific categories which all have a biblical antecedent. Thus, we have the Marthas (servants), the Wives, the Handmaids, and even the women of Jezebel's brothel who, in a way, acquire a religious dimension¹⁹⁴. We may add that Atwood's regime is based on the Old Testament instead of the rather more egalitarian tone that follows the arrival of Jesus¹⁹⁵.

Atwood's decision to give her dystopia a religious frame can be explained by the fact that widespread interpretations of Christianity, and a number of other religions, have for centuries advocated various forms of misogyny, defining women's primary role as giving birth and docilely accepting the rule of their husbands. The pain of labor is something which Atwood does not omit, as is illustrated by the “Birth Day” chapters¹⁹⁶. The fact that women in labor are given no anesthetics extends Gilead's backwardness to technology, which is unusual in dystopias: there is generally a contrast between the state's barbaric dismissal of civil rights and its masterful handling

¹⁹² Jane Donawerth, “Genre Blending and the Critical Dystopia”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁹³ We will deal with this more closely in III – 1.3. a) **A Regime based on Make-Believe.**

¹⁹⁴ Jezebel being a false prophet who, due to her use of makeup and fine clothes, was later associated with prostitutes. See Book of Kings (1 Kings 16: 31)

¹⁹⁵ “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”, Galatians (3: 27-8).

¹⁹⁶ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 117-151.

of modern (or future) technologies¹⁹⁷. The refusal to alleviate a woman's pain while she is giving birth strictly follows the Bible: "[W]ith painful labor you will give birth to children"¹⁹⁸. This is a direct punishment for Eve's guilt in the original sin, through which all of women are made complicit.

It is interesting that Atwood's patriarchal dystopia should rely so closely on the myth of the fall of man, as it is often associated with the origins of sexism, if indeed such origins can be accurately traced¹⁹⁹. Misogyny, over the centuries, has often been related to women's responsibility in triggering man's fall from Eden, forcing upon him (and herself) all of the sufferings inherent to the human condition. The myth of Pandora, the Greeks' equivalent for this biblical passage, was at the roots of Ancient Greece's remarkable misogyny, which even managed to baffle contemporary Romans²⁰⁰, who were far from promoting equalitarian measures at home. So, it appears that for centuries, the myth of original sin has fashioned the way in which women were perceived, whether as evil temptresses or obedient wives, fashioning indeed the two main representations of women, through the dichotomy of good versus bad.

a) Good Girls

Atwood's novel approaches those archetypes which women have been made to endure for centuries, making a division between the 'good girl' figures that are imposed by Gilead and their 'bad' rebellious counterparts. Let us start by the former and note that, in Atwood's novel, there are only three things which a 'good' woman can be: a servant, a child-bearer, and a wife. The Handmaids are, of course, those whose plight is most unthinkable, as they are viewed (and come to view themselves) only as containers, whose whole existence is legitimated by their capacity to have children. Their role is directly borrowed from the Bible, following the pattern of Rachel's maid, Bilhah, whom she gives to her husband Jacob so that "I may also have children by her"²⁰¹. This function of a maid acting as a surrogate for an infertile wife was a common legal practice and can be found in the Code of Hammurabi²⁰², as Josy

¹⁹⁷ However, this is not a way for Atwood to reject the science fiction legacy of frightful technological progress, as the "Soul Scrolls" passage demonstrates (Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 176-177).

¹⁹⁸ Genesis (3: 16).

¹⁹⁹ More to be read in the first chapter of Jack Holland's *Brief History of Misogyny*, *op. cit.*, p. 13-36.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 42.

²⁰¹ Genesis, 30: 1-3. Those passages are read by the Commander before the Ceremony (Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 99-100).

²⁰² A Babylonian legal code of the eighteenth century B.C.

Eisenberg points out in *La femme au temps de la Bible*²⁰³. However, the status of Handmaids is not as derogatory in the Bible as it is in Atwood's novel. Following what Eisenberg tells us, it is halfway between wife and concubine²⁰⁴, something very different from what Offred describes: "[...] we aren't concubines, geisha girls [...] everything possible has been done to remove us from that category"²⁰⁵.

The status of Handmaids is paradoxical, as they are reproved many times by other women²⁰⁶ while officially to be regarded as "chaste vessels"²⁰⁷. Handmaids are, in themselves, a contradiction: they are sexuality without eroticism, procreation without motherhood. They are both held in contempt for their direct link with sexuality and valued for their capacity to have a child in a world in which infertility has become the norm. Indeed, Handmaids are to embody Gilead's return to nature²⁰⁸, which is linked with procreation whereas eroticism and motherhood are rather connected to culture. Yet this reductive treatment of women is itself linked to a misogynistic culture rather to a natural norm. Throughout the novel, Atwood reminds the reader that women's worth, for millennia and across the globe, was evaluated according to their capacity to bear children, thus they became an object of scorn with old age. This is something which Marina Warner discusses when she speaks of the figure of the hag, who represents everything that is traditionally unfitting for women: "Decrepitude enciphered ugliness, ugliness unloveliness, unloveliness unwomanliness, unwomanliness infertility: a state of being against nature"²⁰⁹. If a woman is defined by her ability to give birth, an old woman is no longer even a woman, and we may link this with Atwood's neologism "unwoman", which in a large part refers to the elderly women who have been sent to the colonies.

When a woman cannot have children, in Gilead, she may also be a servant or a Wife. Both restrict women to the domestic sphere and thus conform to the stereotype

²⁰³ Eisenberg, Josy. *La femme au temps de la Bible*. Stock L. Pernoud 1993, p. 23 : « [...] le code d'Hammourabi prévoit qu'une maîtresse stérile peut donner une servante à son époux, et que l'enfant issu de cette union sera le sien propre. En échange de sa renonciation à l'enfant, cette véritable mère porteuse recouvre sa liberté ».

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 25.

²⁰⁵ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 146.

²⁰⁶ For instance, the Marthas talking about Offred: "I heard Rita say to Cora that she wouldn't debase herself like that" (*ibid*, p. 20) and the wives (*ibid*, p. 125): "Little whores, all of them".

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 255.

²⁰⁸ More will be said about this in the next subpart.

²⁰⁹ Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and their Tellers*. 1994. Vintage Books 1995, p. 44.

of gender roles²¹⁰. The Wives, although members of the elite, are also representative of the prejudice that has plagued women for most of history, as they gain social status and recognition only through marriage. As female activist Elizabeth Stanton pointed out, at Seneca Falls, during the first Women's Rights Convention in history: "A woman is a nobody. A wife is everything"²¹¹. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the passage of the marriage ceremony²¹², during which several young girls are given to their future husbands, is a good illustration of the androcentric perception according to which women's lives revolve around marriage and around pleasing men. The Commander sums up the former lives of supposedly liberated women as "starving [themselves]" and "pump[ing] their breasts full of silicon", only to "get a man"²¹³.

The reintroduction of arranged marriages in itself is a reminder of the injustice from which women have suffered for centuries, as they were, in many cases, denied the possibility to refuse or choose a mate. The young brides that Atwood describes are "no more than fourteen", their white dresses a symbol of their purity and, like 'good girls', Offred laments, "they'll always have been silent"²¹⁴.

b) Bad Girls

If to be a 'good girl' in Gilead is to bear children or be a docile servant or wife, one may wonder what is considered 'bad' or unfitting for a woman. Here, once again, Atwood relies on the misogynistic stereotypes that have resulted from religion. The first thing we may evoke, as characteristic of 'bad women', is speech in itself. We have already addressed the paradox of having a speechless narrator in our first part, however we have not made any connection with the Christian prejudice that associated women's words with guile, with their identification as temptresses. As Marina Warner tells us: "Women's words are mixed up with women's wiles [...] Eve sinned by mouth: she bit into the apple of knowledge, she spoke to the serpent and to Adam, and she was in consequence cursed with desire"²¹⁵. Beauty in itself, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is resented as a lure²¹⁶. Women are made responsible for the temptation they arouse in

²¹⁰ Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. 1980. Harper Perennial Modern Classics 2005. The sixth chapter deals with women and "the cult of domesticity" p. 114.

²¹¹ As quoted in Howard Zinn's *History of the United States*, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

²¹² Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

²¹³ *Ibid*, p. 232.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 231.

²¹⁵ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²¹⁶ "I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel [...] with shamefacedness and sobriety" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

men, as this chilling passage from the Red Centre illustrates: “[...] to be seen [...] is to be penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable”²¹⁷. This compels women to correspond to impossible standards, as they are blamed for something in which they are passive (being looked at or wanted by men), following the same logic as the rape shaming which we have already discussed. By advocating plainness in women, *The Handmaid’s Tale* relies on historical examples, as Jack Holland tells us: “From Plato onwards, it has been the goal of every totalitarian regime to stop women from putting on makeup”²¹⁸. By referring to Plato, he is alluding to his *Republic*, in which female Guardians were the equals of men but only because they were made indistinguishable from them in clothing²¹⁹.

In the religious tradition, as we have seen, there is a connection between beauty and speech, as both are attributes of Eve and linked with original sin, with seduction. Following this definition, the most obvious example of ‘bad girls’ in the novel are the women of Jezebel’s. It is interesting enough that Atwood introduced a brothel in her novel, especially one that is more or less legal, however contrary it is to Gilead’s ideology. It seems to follow the same logic as what the Athenian lawgiver Solon did in Ancient Greece: “Having ensured that the ‘good girls’ were safe from any taint of sexual indiscretion, it was necessary to supply the ‘bad girls’ to cater for men’s sexual appetites [and] Solon legalized state brothels”²²⁰. This is a decent explanation for the Jezebel’s clubs in the novel and demonstrates how thorough Atwood was in her depiction of female exploitation. The women of Jezebel’s are ‘bad’ inasmuch as they are everything that Gilead represses: they wear costumes, makeup, they are sexy and festive²²¹. Yet their rebellious quality is ambiguous, as is illustrated by Offred’s interrogation: “[...] have they chosen it? You can’t tell by looking”²²². It is clear enough that though Jezebel’s women may appear more liberated than most, in Gilead, they are only submitted to a different form of slavery, characterized by prostitution. They, too, exist only to serve at the pleasure of men.

However, there is another dissenting female figure in the novel, though it is only hinted at, which is more strongly linked with insubordination. Witches, historically,

²¹⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²¹⁸ Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 28-30.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 23.

²²¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

²²² *Ibid*, p. 247.

were more often than not powerful or emancipated women. As expert John Putnam Demos describes them: “[...] abrasive in style, contentious in character – and stubbornly resilient in the face of adversity”²²³. One might also argue that witches, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, are an important motif, not only because witch hunts have been the most lethal form of misogyny²²⁴ or because it is evocative of empowered women facing persecution. It is important to keep in mind that the novel is itself dedicated to Mary Webster, Atwood’s Puritan ancestor, who was hanged as a witch in 1683 but who, having survived the hanging, was set free²²⁵. In the novel, motifs of witchcraft are recurrent through the images of fire²²⁶, cats²²⁷ (the witch’s traditional pet) and the hanging of women²²⁸. Of course, the very atmosphere of Gilead, overwhelmingly Puritan, is evocative of the New England witch trials, perhaps the most famous in history. The red dresses of the Handmaids are also reminiscent of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*²²⁹, which is perhaps the most famous American novel set in the Puritan period. The theme of witchcraft is also associated with rebelliousness, as is exemplified by the passage of the wedding ceremony²³⁰: when Offred looks at the nuns that have been hiding underground, who are forced to become Handmaids, as they are considered too dangerous to become Wives, she thinks, “[t]here’s an odour of witch about them [...] they don’t let go easily.”²³¹ This enables us to conclude that, in Atwood’s novel, and as in most patriarchal regimes, ‘bad’ women are closely associated with insubordination.

After this brief overview of Gilead’s ‘good’ and ‘bad’ according to religious standards, we may move on to another aspect of *The Handmaid’s Tale* which blends fiction and stereotype: the intimate connection between nature and women. An appropriate image, in a world where women are determined by an essentialist association between both.

²²³ Demos, J.P. *Entertaining Satan*. Oxford University Press 1982, p. 94.

²²⁴ Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny*, op. cit., p. 115-116.

²²⁵ <http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/mary-webster-witch-hadley-survives-hanging/>, date of access 12/12/2017.

²²⁶ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, op. cit., p. 46: “the flames shot high”, “burning books”, “the fire drew me back”.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 202.

²²⁸ Example of the hanged women at the Salvagings, who look like “flightless birds, wrecked angels” *ibid*, p. 289. They can be linked with a poem written by Atwood about her ancestor “Half-hanged Mary” (<https://genius.com/Margaret-atwood-half-hanged-mary-annotated>, date of access 13/12/2017).

²²⁹ Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. 1850. Everyman’s Library 1992.

²³⁰ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, op. cit., p. 230-232.

²³¹ *Ibid*, p. 232.

1.3. Women and Nature

Prejudice has for century represented “woman as nature and man as spirit”²³², thus legitimating the rule which the latter gender exerted on the former. If women were “wild and irrational creatures, eruptions of nature”²³³, then they were incapable of self-rule, and even posed a threat to the civilized order of men. The evidence of this connection was to be found in how women were incapable of transcending their biological functions²³⁴, which also gave way to the widespread stereotype that women are slaves to their emotions and desires, are hysterical where men are rational, primitive where men are civilized²³⁵.

This explains the important lexical field of nature, which is omnipresent in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and constantly draws links between the natural world and women, especially Handmaids. For example, we can think of their education at the Red Centre, where they are told to think of themselves as “seeds”²³⁶, of the parallel between the tulips and Offred in Serena’s garden²³⁷, and of the recurrent associations of plants with human attributes²³⁸. In nature, we may see a return of the body, which Gilead is trying to obscure. Flowers, Offred tells us, are one of the “good things”²³⁹ in her story. Like the moon, they are images of fertility and, traditionally, of femininity. However, Atwood does not only embrace the symbolism of a female nature, she uses it to demonstrate the unnaturalness of Gilead, by suggesting it may strike back. For instance, we read that “there is something subversive about this garden”, “a sense of buried things bursting upwards”²⁴⁰. The Handmaids of Atwood’s novel, reduced to the function of giving birth, are denatured²⁴¹, as is the process of procreation itself. However, there are hints that a rebellion is coming, a revolt from nature, which may prevail over the unnatural order of Gilead. As Offred tells us, “[w]hatever is silenced

²³² Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny*, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

²³³ *Ibid*, p. 26.

²³⁴ They could not, for instance, avoid giving birth.

²³⁵ Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

²³⁶ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 22.

²³⁸ For example, the irises are “bleeding hearts, so female in shape” *ibid*, p. 161, and p. 27 “the gravel path [...] divides the back lawn, neatly, like a hair parting.”

²³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 279.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 161.

²⁴¹ Handmaids are literally denatured in the sense that they have been stripped of their natural characters and properties, as women but also as free human beings.

(<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/denature?s=t>, date of access 18/05/2018).

will clamour to be heard, though silently”²⁴², a paradox that mirrors the contrast between Offred’s speechlessness and her oral tale. Besides, nature appears to have resisted the toxic waste and radiations that have led to widespread sterility²⁴³: there is an emphasis on the fertility²⁴⁴ of nature, which is an example of its resilience and, through Atwood’s extended metaphor, that of womankind. This certainly illustrates the utopian tendency of *The Handmaid’s Tale* that has led some scholars²⁴⁵ to view it as a critical dystopia²⁴⁶.

Thus, it is evident that Gilead is not a “return [...] to Nature’s norm”²⁴⁷, as the Commander claims at the wedding ceremony. It is quite the opposite. As we address the theme of nature, it is also important for us to examine the recurrent association of women and animals, which is also anchored in a misogynistic prejudice²⁴⁸. Birds especially are used to create parallels with Handmaids, for instance, through the white wings on their outfits. Birds are also directly evoked by Offred’s costume when she visits Jezebel’s club²⁴⁹. Another example of this parallel can be found when Rita, a Martha, is cooking a chicken before taking Offred to her bath. When she says she needs “to tenderize this bird”²⁵⁰, it is unclear which task she is referring to. The cooking itself, as Rita “pokes [a finger] into the cavity”²⁵¹, uncomfortably mirrors Offred’s subsequent doctor appointment²⁵², reinforcing the connection between woman and bird. It might be interesting to note that, in common lore and especially in the fairytale tradition, birds were associated both to women and storytellers²⁵³, namely through the

²⁴² Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 317.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 27. There are also numerous parallels between plants and reproduction, for example: “[flowers are] the genital organs of plants” *ibid*, p. 91.

²⁴⁵ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, *op. cit.*, p. 166: Moylan informs us that many experts, including Raffaella Baccolini, consider *HT* as a critical dystopia, though he himself believes it is classical while stretching the limits of the genre to an extreme.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 196: a critical dystopia “[...] adopts a militant stance that is informed and empowered by a utopian horizon that appears in the text or at least shimmers beyond its pages.” It is often characterized by self-reflexivity and by genre blurring.

²⁴⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

²⁴⁸ Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny*, *op. cit.*, p. 43-44: “[...] woman is a violent and uncontrolled animal”, as stated by Cato the elder in Ancient Rome.

²⁴⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 242, the costume is made of “feathers, mauve and pink”.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 58.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 57.

²⁵² “I am poked and prodded. The finger retreats, enters otherwise, withdraws.” *Ibid*, p. 70.

²⁵³ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, *op. cit.*, p.54.

figure of Mother Goose, whereas the stork and waterfowl in general were linked with fertility²⁵⁴.

To return to a broader image of animality, we may observe that, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women (at least Handmaids) are certainly treated like animals, as is illustrated by a conversation between the Wives²⁵⁵. The contemptuous tone of the female elite towards the Handmaids demonstrates how the latter have been degraded to the status of animals, who must behave as tame pets or endure punishments that may go as far as physical violence²⁵⁶. It is also representative of the hierarchical system which is at the core of Gilead, as its redistribution of power does not leave women entirely destitute.

Now that we have studied the codes of misogyny in Gilead and how it relates to Atwood's (and the reader's) society, we can move on to the way power is strategically divided between the different members of the regime.

2. A Redistribution of Power

Though women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are undoubtedly the oppressed, Atwood's creation is neither binary nor simplistic. Not all men are powerful, in Gilead, and not all of its victims are women. For that matter, not all women are victims, at least apparently. Instead, Atwood's novel creates a complex system of power relations, which is key to the functioning of dystopian regimes, and which requires closer attention.

2.1. Women's Hierarchy of Privilege

A common means for a small elite to hold on to power is to create a hierarchy among the oppressed, decreasing the chances of a rebellion²⁵⁷. As this has happened so often in history, it is logical that it should be a recurrent feature in the totalitarian

²⁵⁴ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

²⁵⁵ "Some of them [...] aren't even clean [...] you] have to hold her down in the bathtub [...] you have to threaten her." Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

²⁵⁶ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 26: "They [the Wives] can hit us, there's Scriptural precedent."

²⁵⁷ For instance, we may think of slavery in America and the efforts that were made to create a hatred of blacks amongst Indians and to prevent bonding between blacks and indentured servants, who were granted better treatment precisely for that purpose. More can be read about this in the third chapter of Howard Zinn's *History of the United States*. The system of Apartheid is also an excellent example: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/race-and-ethnicity-south-africa>, date of access 01/01/2018.

regimes of dystopia²⁵⁸. Once more, the relation between textual and external worlds must be emphasized, according to the fiction theories we have already mentioned. All of the stereotypes that we have discussed in the last part, about religion, nature and women, all stem from reality and emphasize the status of Atwood's novel as a reconstruction, as its connection with her own world is fundamental. The same can be said of power and gender relations, in Gilead²⁵⁹.

As we have so far focused essentially on the enslavement of women, we may begin now by paying special attention to their share of power in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In Gilead, everything is done to prevent women from developing what we might call a class consciousness²⁶⁰, which might result in their gathering against the regime. In her analysis of Atwood's dystopia, Erica Gottlieb lays emphasis on the importance of this hierarchical system²⁶¹. The Wives and Aunts are indeed the most powerful female figures of Gilead, in terms of legislation²⁶². The former are entitled to certain prerogatives: like in the Bible, the Wives are the ones who name children²⁶³ and they have their own territory, which their husbands are not supposed to enter without knocking²⁶⁴. The Wives are also given power over the Handmaids, as "household discipline"²⁶⁵ is considered their business. Therefore, the protagonist of Atwood's novel is not only submitted to men but to other women. Moreover, the Wives seem convinced of the Handmaids' lower status²⁶⁶, considering them inferior not only to men but to themselves, however inconsistent the biological inferiority of a subcategory of women appears.

Yet whatever power women have in the novel seems highly symbolical. Regardless of their social ranks, the women remain subordinated to men. For instance, when the Commander asks Offred to meet him in his office, she goes even though Serena might

²⁵⁸ For example: *Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley, 1932), *Swastika Night* (Katharine Burdekin, 1937), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell, 1949).

²⁵⁹ They, too, are profoundly anchored in Atwood's and the reader's world.

²⁶⁰ A term with Marxist origins (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/class-consciousness>, date of access 10/01/2018).

²⁶¹ "One could say that the entire population is enslaved, but the males still feel more privileged than the females, the wives and Aunts more than the other females, and the general mass of female slaves are still given the privilege of looking down on the victim singled out to be torn apart as less privileged" Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

²⁶² This has nothing to do with the rebellious, strong female figures that the reader is meant to find inspiring and whom we will discuss in III – 3.1. **Figures of Rebellion.**

²⁶³ Josy Eisenberg, *La femme au temps de la Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁶⁴ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 146.

²⁶⁶ "They don't have the same feelings we do" *ibid*, p. 227.

punish her for it because: “There’s no doubt about who holds the *real* power”²⁶⁷. The Aunts, who are also important figures of the regime, do appear to have a certain authority, however they are forbidden to carry guns²⁶⁸ and, like the Wives, their suffering from Gilead’s legislation is hinted at several times²⁶⁹. Therefore, even the women who are figures of oppression are also presented, to some degree, as victims. The real purpose of women’s privilege is to maintain hostile relations between them, so that they all “envy each other something”²⁷⁰.

If women distrust and resent one another, they are unable to unite against their real enemy. That is to say, the men of Gilead. Yet we will see that their portrayal in the novel is no more Manichean than women’s.

2.2. The Men of Gilead

Men are clearly those that benefit the most from the regime of Gilead, however, not all of them are equal: the guards are below the Angels who are below the Commanders, the highest figures of authority in the book.

Let us begin, then, with Offred’s Commander, whom we can consider replaces the worshipped dictator of traditional dystopias²⁷¹. The first remark we can make is that this patriarch is rather more flawed than his counterpart in much of dystopian literature. The Commander is not omniscient, in fact, he is presented as having many weaknesses, which are stereotypically masculine: his loneliness leads him to indulge in alcohol²⁷² and to find comfort in a mistress, a term which Offred uses to describe herself several times²⁷³. With his sheepish smile and games of scrabble²⁷⁴, the Commander certainly does not have the threatening allure of Orwell’s O’Brien, for example. Yet there is an ambiguity about him which we cannot overlook. Many times, it is hinted that there is more to the Commander than meets the eye²⁷⁵. Perhaps the most flagrant image of domination is when Offred is hiding in his car, as he takes her to Jezebel’s, and her

²⁶⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 146 (my emphasis).

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 14.

²⁶⁹ For example: one of the Aunts at the Red Centre says: “Don’t think it’s easy for me either” *Ibid*, p. 65. As for the Wives’ suffering, we can think of the passage of the Ceremony, when Offred wonders, “Which of us is it worse for, her or me?” *Ibid*, p. 106.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 57.

²⁷¹ The figure of the dictator/benefactor will be examined more closely in III – 1.1. The Actors.

²⁷² Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 220.

²⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 172.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 148.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 167, he is “craftier than he looks” and p. 97, he is “falsely innocuous”.

face “is against his shoes”²⁷⁶. The image of the boot is reminiscent of Orwell’s prophetic statement: “If you want a vision of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever”²⁷⁷. The Commander’s shoes, Offred tells us, “feel hard, unwinking [...] black, polished, inscrutable. They seem to have nothing to do with feet”²⁷⁸. And they do not. In fact, they are representative of the domination of the state over the individual²⁷⁹ and of men over women²⁸⁰. More implicitly, we may also think of the first time that Offred goes into the Commander’s office²⁸¹. Offred’s unreliability as a narrator comes into play again: she might be making the Commander seem less scary to reassure herself²⁸².

The relation between Offred and the Commander is also more complex than might be expected. The game of power between the two is strikingly business-like: Offred gains things²⁸³ from the Commander in exchange for her visits to his office and an “obligatory kiss”²⁸⁴. This bargain enables Offred some form of power, but her strongest leverage against the Commander is less formal. It is “the possibility of [her] own death”²⁸⁵: if Offred kills herself, or if she does not become pregnant, the Commander will bear the guilt of her death. On the evening of the Ceremony, the eyes of all the women in the room are set on the Commander²⁸⁶. Though the eye is a recurrent dystopian motif and generally represents the constant surveillance imposed by the regime²⁸⁷, here we may interpret it rather as a symbol for conscience and guilt.

²⁷⁶ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

²⁷⁷ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=George%20Orwell>, date of access 20/01/2018.

²⁷⁸ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

²⁷⁹ The image of proto-dystopian writer Jack London’s *Iron Heel* could also be referenced here: “We will grind you revolutionists down under our heel, and we shall walk upon your faces.” London, Jack. *The Iron Heel*. 1907. Chicago Review Press 1981, Chapter V, The Philomaths.

²⁸⁰ The boot is also associated with misogyny: we can think again of Jack London, as quoted in Holland’s *History of Misogyny* p. 185: “Wife-beating is the masculine prerogative of matrimony. They wear remarkable boots of brass and iron, and [...] trample [their wives] very much as a western stallion tramples rattlesnakes”.

²⁸¹ Offred is “terrified” and “choose[s] to interpret [his frown] as concern” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 147-148.

²⁸² It is fairly clear when Offred states “he hasn’t brought [her] here to touch [her] in any way” p. 148, that what she feared was rape.

²⁸³ We may think of the magazines p. 164 or the hand lotion p. 166.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 167.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 198.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 98: “I’ve got my eye on you. One false move and I’m dead” and “To be a man, watched by women”.

²⁸⁷ We will develop this aspect in our third part.

For a moment, the scale of powers is reversed: the main male figure is being watched by women, when they are usually the ones under constant surveillance²⁸⁸.

Therefore, we can see that Offred, too, has power over the Commander, despite her social status. However, we cannot forget that his own power is not only the result of his position as a Commander: she also tries to please him only because she feels she ought to, because he is a man and she is a woman²⁸⁹. Here Atwood is deliberately vague as to whether this instinct is due to Offred's recent indoctrination in Gilead or dates back to preexistent forms of sexism.

This ambiguity is further developed in the flashbacks that teach us about Offred's love life. More generally, Luke and Nick, Offred's love interests, are also interesting for us to consider, as they add to the portrayal of men in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Mary McCarthy, in her book review, claims that both lack characterization and cannot be told apart, which may be a little unfair. In truth, Luke is probably the least developed character of the two and he seems to carry some traits of everyday misogyny²⁹⁰. Of course, his relationship with Offred also suffers from the recent installation of Gilead, which might account for what is dislikable in his character: the point is to show what happens to a loving relationship when men and women are no longer considered equals²⁹¹.

Nick, on the other hand, is a more active and positive figure. To begin with, he does not belong to the past as Luke does, and his relationship with Offred is more empowering, as it restores Offred's status as an individual and as a woman²⁹². He is associated to courtly love²⁹³, which is affiliated with a certain respect towards women. Love in itself is described as an inherent part of being human²⁹⁴, so in this respect, Nick enables Offred to recover her existence. Yet he is also a character best defined by his ambiguity: even at the very end of the novel, it is uncertain whether he is a

²⁸⁸ This reversal is completed at the end of the novel, when Offred looks down on the Commander, who is "shrinking" *ibid*, p. 306.

²⁸⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 267: "Fake it, I scream at myself [...] Move your flesh around, breathe audibly. It's the least you can do." And p. 144: "you will never be subjected to the temptation of feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman."

²⁹⁰ For instance, when Offred loses her job, his attempts to comfort her sound vaguely patronizing: "You know I'll always take care of you", *ibid*, p. 188. He also discourages her from going to the marches, "Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about [...] my family" *ibid*, p. 189.

²⁹¹ Especially clear p. 191, when Offred says: "I couldn't afford to lose you."

²⁹² For example, p. 282: "I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known."

²⁹³ "I have no rose to toss, he has no lute. But it's the same kind of hunger." *ibid*, p. 201.

²⁹⁴ "It's lack of love we die from [...] Can I be blamed for wanting a real body [...]? Without it I too am disembodied." *ibid*, p. 113.

traitor or a friend, a rebel or an Eye. In fact, Nick represents the unknowable other, he is a metonymy for the threat and the appeal embodied by men. This impossibility to know or trust the other gender is addressed when Offred wonders: “Who knows what they do, on their own with other men? [...] Who can tell what they really are? Under their daily-ness.”²⁹⁵ As Offred reflects on this before the instalment of Gilead, it may be linked directly to Atwood’s (and the reader’s) society.

Yet if men, in her novel, are unknowable, being presented as objects of love as well as fear and figures of abusive power, they are also suffering from the regime. For instance, the sexuality of the guards is controlled to a ridiculous extreme²⁹⁶, as a means of ensuring their obedience to the regime, so they may work hard for a promotion until they are assigned a Handmaid. What is perhaps more surprising is that, many times in the novel, Atwood also considers the pressure that members of the elite may suffer from. For instance, we may return to the passage when the Commander is watched by the women, before the Ceremony: “It must be entirely strange [...] To have them thinking, he can’t do it, he won’t do [...] as if he were a garment.”²⁹⁷ The risk of ridicule through impotence, which is clearly suggested here, perfectly illustrates the gap between the abstract figure of a worshipped ruler and the fallible human who has to embody this role. We have already mentioned the objectification of women²⁹⁸, but the passage under scrutiny gives us an impression of reciprocity, of symmetric objectification²⁹⁹. By addressing the difficulties experienced by the ruling men³⁰⁰, Atwood both humanizes the oppressor and demonstrates that no happiness can be achieved through the dominance of one gender over the other. Considering the connection between the imaginary world and the real one which we have dealt with several times, we can argue this is a statement that transcends textual boundaries, that here Atwood uses fiction to comment on the world she lives in. In the end, Gilead is

²⁹⁵ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 238.

²⁹⁶ Not only are they forbidden to touch women (*Ibid*, p. 32), they are forbidden to touch themselves (*ibid*, p. 100: they “aren’t even allowed to put their hands in their pockets”).

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 98.

²⁹⁸ Cf: I – 3.2. **Alienated Bodies.**

²⁹⁹ Both men and women are objectified by each other: “To have them putting him on [...] while he himself puts them on” Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 98.

³⁰⁰ “It must be hell, to be a man, like that. It must be just fine. [...] It must be very silent.” *Ibid*, p. 99.

neither an improvement for women nor men, regardless of what the Commander claims: “We thought we could do better.”³⁰¹

2.3. Beyond Genders

However central the issue of genders in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and although the oppression of women is what is most extensively dealt with, we can note that Atwood also makes an effort to go beyond genders. Indeed, her novel is concerned with other forms of discriminations such as racism, antisemitism and homophobia. Racism in particular is interesting, as the novel never makes any reference to the skin color of any of its characters. The only time it is clearly addressed is in the “Historical Notes”, which tell us that the origins of Gilead’s “racist policies” were to be found in the “pre-Gilead period”³⁰², that is to say, Atwood’s period. Moreover, subtle references to racial discrimination are frequent in the novel. The Particicution ritual³⁰³ is very reminiscent of the lynching of blacks, especially when we consider the pretext that is used by the Aunts. Like many of the blacks who were lynched in twentieth-century America³⁰⁴, the man who is executed by the Handmaids is wrongfully accused of rape. In the same vein, the Underground Femaleroad reminds the reader of the Underground Railroad³⁰⁵, a system through which slaves were secretly helped to reach the north of the country or Canada, before the abolition of slavery. In an online article, freelance writer Noah Berlatsky interestingly points to the parallel between Gilead’s misogyny and that of some oriental countries, comparing the Handmaids’ dresses to “nuns’ habits and burqas”, linking women’s plight to racial discrimination³⁰⁶. In Atwood’s novel, Berlatsky writes, “independent Western women have fallen into an Orientalist nightmare. The terrible thing about being a Handmaid is that you cease to be white.” As it is confirmed at the end of the novel that Gilead is only interested in white

³⁰¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 222. This quotation also demonstrates that the Commander thinks of Gilead as a failure in some way, as the tense used is the simple past, which creates a clear-cut demarcation with the present.

³⁰² *Ibid* p. 317.

³⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 290-293.

³⁰⁴ In *The Red Record*, Ida Wells exposes the fabricated rape charge as the basis for lynching blacks. Wells, Ida. *The Red Record*. 1895. Echo Library 2006.

³⁰⁵ Definition <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/underground-railroad>, date of access 23/01/2018.

³⁰⁶ <https://www.theverge.com/2017/6/15/15808530/Handmaids-tale-hulu-margaret-atwood-black-history-racial-erasure>, date of access 23/01/2018.

babies³⁰⁷, one might deduce that the absence of black people in the novel is the result of relocation³⁰⁸ or even mass murder.

More explicit references are made to Jews and to the Holocaust³⁰⁹, as we learn that Jewish people in Gilead, additionally to being identified by yellow stars³¹⁰, are given the choice between migration or conversion. However, in effect, “more than one boatload of Jews was simply dumped into the Atlantic”³¹¹. That Jews should be victimized as well as women makes sense, not only as a result of the Puritan aspect of Gilead which would be highly intolerant of different religious practices, but also because of the period in which Atwood grew up³¹². Just as the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century marked the minds of dystopian authors, the persecution of Jews during the Second World War was profoundly traumatic and inspired the creation of nightmarish settings such as Gilead.

Therefore, though women are certainly the main focus of Atwood’s novel, they are by no means the only victims: priests, homosexuals, doctors (who performed abortions) and other dissidents, are not enslaved but executed and left hanging on the Wall³¹³ to be an example.

The main victims that a dystopia concentrates on are often representative of what the author seeks to expose in their society. By the time Atwood wrote hers, many were already concerned with women’s rights. It is now necessary for us to examine *The Handmaid’s Tale* in relation to feminist dystopias, whose central subject is the oppression women suffer from in patriarchal systems.

3. Feminist Dystopian Fiction

As the aim of this dissertation is to examine how *The Handmaid’s Tale* corresponds to the dystopian tradition established by pioneering authors, it is important for us to keep in mind that novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *Player Piano* depict society “primarily from a male point of view”³¹⁴. This

³⁰⁷ The “Historical Notes” teach us that one of the causes for Gilead was the “plummeting Caucasian birth rates” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

³⁰⁸ We are told, p. 93, that the “Children of Ham” are transported by thousands.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 211, 155, 319.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 210.

³¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 320.

³¹² She was born in 1939.

³¹³ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

³¹⁴ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

may indicate that dystopia is, at least at the roots, a male-centered genre. Indeed, some of these landmark novels only give women a marginal role, yet though Erika Gottlieb acknowledges a turn with the increasing involvement of women in the genre from the 1970s³¹⁵, she seems to omit an important aspect of dystopian history. *Swastika Night*, written by Katharine Burdekin and published in 1937, was an essential contribution to the shaping of the dystopian genre, from which Orwell borrowed a great deal³¹⁶. Yet although Burdekin's novel was a cornerstone in the establishment of the dystopian tradition, one of its main focuses, the condition of women in an oppressive patriarchy, was to be largely neglected by dystopian authors until the 1960s³¹⁷.

3.1. A Definition

According to Professor Ildney Cavalcanti, feminist dystopias “paint an exaggerated picture of the existing power relations between the sexes” and are thus a “radical critique of empirical power relations”³¹⁸. Applying this statement to Atwood's novel, we would have to come to the conclusion, once again, that gender relations are not imaginatively constructed but reconstructed, are merely an exaggeration of their real-world counterparts. The critical aspect of feminist dystopias alluded to here is also important, as it is to be linked with the dystopian revival of the 1980s-1990s³¹⁹. The dystopias that have been produced during this period have often been dubbed “critical dystopias”, for their blending of utopian and dystopian elements³²⁰. Often enough, Cavalcanti adds, feminist dystopias are critical not only of “androcentric culture [but of] certain aspects of feminism itself”³²¹.

If gendered oppression is the main common point between feminist³²² dystopias, it would be interesting for us to see how it is expressed. In other words, what do female

³¹⁵ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

³¹⁶ As Daphne Patai points out in her introduction to *Swastika Night* (Katharine Burdekin, 1937) both Burdekin's novel and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell, 1949) “depict totalitarian regimes in which individual thought has been [...] eliminated [...] the world is divided into distinct empires in perpetual and static competition” and both feature “hierarchical extremes” and a “secret opposition [...] called [the] Brotherhood”, p. xii-xiii.

³¹⁷ Ildney Cavalcanti, “The Writing of Utopia and the Feminist Critical Dystopia”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

³¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 53.

³¹⁹ Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, “Dystopia and Histories”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 2-3.

³²¹ Ildney Cavalcanti, “The Writing of Utopia and the Feminist Critical Dystopia”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

³²² “Feminist” here is to be understood as having to do with the “recent cultural phenomenon of women's explicit self-identification as an oppressed group” *ibid*, p. 47.

authors systematically include in those places which are specifically hostile to women? One of the main recurrent features, perhaps the most striking, is sexual enslavement. As it is the case in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the women of feminist dystopias have often lost the right to refuse a man and are commonly regarded by the male population as an inferior race. This is the case in Burdekin's *Swastika Night*³²³ as well as in the Suzy Charnas's *Holdfast Chronicles*³²⁴ (whose women are referred to as 'unmen'). Loss of sexual autonomy is accompanied by women's loss of control over their reproductive fate. In the words of Maria Varsam: "A woman's body becomes a commodity with an exchange value as the woman is not the owner of this commodity but [...] the laborer who must provide the goods"³²⁵.

Obviously, this reminds us of the Handmaids' obligation to produce a child, but it is also to be found in *Swastika Night*, in which the women are merely considered as breeding machines, have no purpose in society but to give birth to boys (the birth of girls being a disgrace). In Angela Carter's *Passion of New Eve*, a young man, Evelyn, turned into a woman, Eve, whose sufferings may be read as a metonymy for that of womankind³²⁶, is also threatened by forcible impregnation, though she manages to escape in time. This emphasis on reproductive freedom is to be connected with women's struggle to challenge the biological determinism inherent to misogyny³²⁷. As Maria Varsam points out: "[...] to be denied the power over one's reproductive choices alienates a woman from her children, her body, and her sense of womanhood"³²⁸.

Women in such novels are also frequently infantilized³²⁹, which is interesting as it is at once a characteristic of dystopian literature in general and a misogynistic prejudice. Indeed, many dystopian regimes adopt a paternalistic attitude which leads them to treat the people as children. For instance, in a poem called "The Grand

³²³ For example: it must be "firmly fixed in the heads of [...] women that they must not mind being raped." Katharine Burdekin, *Swastika Night*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

³²⁴ Charnas, Suzy. *The Holdfast Chronicles*. 1974. Tor Books 1999.

³²⁵ Maria Varsam, "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

³²⁶ This is made obvious through the name of the protagonist: "Eve".

³²⁷ Misogynists fear the idea of "women controlling their reproductive fate, thus achieving [...] autonomy" Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny*, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

³²⁸ Maria Varsam, "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

³²⁹ "I am like a child here, there are some things I must not be told." Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Inquisitor”³³⁰, Dostoevsky³³¹ gives us a patronizing vision of the masses: “[...] then we shall give them the quiet humble happiness of weak creatures such as they are by nature... We shall show them that they are... only pitiful children”³³². We might see, for instance, how this applies to the population of *Brave New World*, whom for the main part are content with a submissive, drug-induced happiness. Yet infantilization, when applied to women, takes on a different connotation, as it is part of an old prejudice that describes them as incapable of self-rule. In the words of Arthur Schopenhauer: “[woman] is a grown-up child, a creature of arrested development”³³³.

Yet if the women of feminist dystopias are systematically infantilized, deprived of their reproductive and sexual freedom, we may point out other recurrent themes which are unrelated to gender issues. Ecology, for instance, plays an important part in many works of feminist dystopian literature, notably in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*³³⁴. The description of derelict New York in *Passion of New Eve* may also point to ecological issues, and they are undeniably present in *The Handmaid’s Tale*³³⁵. At the time when this subgenre emerged, people were becoming more aware of environmental issues³³⁶, which explains why feminist dystopias would have incorporated them. However, in his study of Butler’s *Parables*, Dr. Elham Mohammad Achachelooei establishes a clear link between feminism and environmentalism, which both deviate from the androcentric Christian ideology advocating the male domination of nature and women³³⁷. The strong interest for ecological issues among feminist writers, he claims, is due to its being viewed as part of the “uncaring [...] masculine mastery of the world”³³⁸. Certainly, as we have seen in a previous subpart³³⁹, metaphors connecting women and the natural world are prolific, in *The Handmaid’s*

³³⁰ The poem is an abstract from *The Brothers Karamazov* (Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1880). The figure of the Great Inquisitor has inspired that of the dystopian worshipped dictator.

³³¹ Erika Gottlieb considers Dostoevsky as one of the most influential proto-dystopian writers (*Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 43-56).

³³² As quoted by Erika Gottlieb, *ibid*, p. 53.

³³³ Schopenhauer as quoted in Jack Holland’s *Brief History of Misogyny*, p. 203.

³³⁴ Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower*. 1993. Grand Central Publishing 2000.

³³⁵ The causes behind the drop in fertility are said to be “nuclear-plant accidents [...], biological warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

³³⁶ More information to be read:

<http://www.encyclopedia.com/earth-and-environment/ecology-and-environmentalism/environmental-studies/environmental-movement>, date of access 25/01/2018.

³³⁷ Achachelooei, Elham Mohammadi. “Butler’s’ *Parables*: A Posthumanist Call to Address Ecological Irresponsibility”, *Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya*. SARJANA Vol. 31, N° 2. 2016, p. 2.

³³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3.

³³⁹ II – 1.3. Women and Nature.

Tale, which might be enough to at least consider this affiliation between environmentalism and feminist ideology.

However, one may observe that the environment is an important theme in science fiction in general, neither restricted to feminist nor to dystopian novels. For instance, we may think of Frank Herbert's famous *Dune*³⁴⁰ series, where lack of water is an essential issue. Moreover, many science fiction writers belonging to the 'New Wave' movement³⁴¹ placed environmental issues at the heart of their novels³⁴².

To finish on our definition of feminist dystopias, we may say it is a genre whose prime focus is to expose the sufferings of women in patriarchal societies, to criticize gendered power relations, as well as some aspects of feminist militancy if they are deemed detrimental to the movement. As it is a genre which became prominent around the same time as the critical dystopia, they share a number of common features, notably genre blending³⁴³, on which we might briefly extend. To Professor Jane Donawerth, merging genres is a way to "open opportunities for radical visions", bringing together "militant pessimism" and "radical hope"³⁴⁴.

Yet we might argue there is a genre which the feminist dystopia in particular is closely related to. It is a subject which deserves closer attention.

3.2. Slave Narratives and *The Handmaid's Tale*

We hope to have already demonstrated, by now, that slavery is an important motif in dystopian fiction. Be that as it may, it is not enough, on its own, to justify a parallel between dystopia and the slave narrative, another highly influential tradition of American literature³⁴⁵. Yet to Maria Varsam, there are enough similarities between both genres for her to make it the object of a whole chapter: "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others"³⁴⁶.

³⁴⁰ Herbert, Frank. *Dune*. 1965. Pocket Sf 2005.

³⁴¹ The New Wave "was a literary movement of the 1960s and 1970s [which included] a rejection of the simplistic action-adventure stories of the 'Golden Age' in favor of more literary and experimental forms of SF" (<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/NewWaveScienceFiction>, date of access 18/05/2018). Some of the best-known New Wave writers include Brian Aldiss, James Ballard and Michael Moorcock).

³⁴² James Ballard's works are a good example (we can think of *The Drowned World*, 1962).

³⁴³ "[T]he crucial turn toward critical dystopia in the last few decades has occurred [...] because of 'blurring borders between genres'" which "open[s] opportunities for radical vision" Jane Donawerth, "Genre Blending and the Critical Dystopia", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 30.

³⁴⁵ More to be read here: <https://www.britannica.com/art/slave-narrative>, date of access 28/01/2018.

³⁴⁶ Maria Varsam, "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizon*, *op. cit.*, chapter 11 (p. 203-224).

However, before we examine the common points between slave narratives³⁴⁷ and feminist dystopias, we might first demonstrate how relevant it is to *The Handmaid's Tale* in particular. In addition to what we have previously said about race³⁴⁸ in this paper, Atwood makes several implicit references to slavery in her novel. We may obviously think of the colonies, where the "Children of Ham"³⁴⁹ are transported by thousands. The reference is made even clearer when we recall that the passage concerning the curse of Ham³⁵⁰ in Genesis was specifically used to justify slavery. Moreover, picking cotton³⁵¹ is one of the tasks attributed to people in the colonies, which is most reminiscent of slaves' lives on cotton plantations. The very transportation of people from Gilead to the colonies³⁵² is at times evocative of the Middle Passage³⁵³. Finally, Maria Varsam herself makes a connection between Atwood's novel and slavery through her use of the word "Jezebel"³⁵⁴.

One must therefore acknowledge that *The Handmaid's Tale* has much in common with the slave narrative tradition: to begin with, they tend to be written in an autobiographic form, whether fictional or not. The aim, Varsam tells us, is to express "the immediacy of experience as well as its authenticity"³⁵⁵. Moreover, both the protagonists of female slave narratives and of feminist dystopias often face similar issues, from the loss of control over their bodies, the constant threat of sexual abuse, to an unimaginable ordeal which is the separation from their children. The fiction of

³⁴⁷ To read more about female slave narratives, the works of authors such as Stephanie Camp (*Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, 2004) and Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (*Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*, 1999) may be interesting. We may also turn to actual slave narratives written by women, for example: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Harriet Jacobs, 1861).

³⁴⁸ Cf: **2.3. Beyond Genders.**

³⁴⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

³⁵⁰ Ham and his descendants are condemned to a life of servitude. Though Ham is never described as black, he was, by the nineteenth century, considered the ancestor of African Americans. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/01/arts/from-noah-s-curse-to-slavery-s-rationale.html>, date of access 29/0/2018.

³⁵¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

³⁵² "How are they transporting that many people at once?" *Ibid*, p. 94.

³⁵³ The Middle Passage refers to "the part of the Atlantic Ocean between the west coast of Africa and the West Indies: the longest part of the journey formerly made by slave ships." <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/middle-passage>, date of access 19/02/2018.

³⁵⁴ "It is striking evidence of Atwood's use of slave narrative conventions that [...] one [...] group of women [...] shares the same biblical name as that attributed to female slaves of the American South. The 'Jezebel' was a carnal image of women slaves" Maria Varsam, "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizon*, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 211.

renowned author Toni Morrison³⁵⁶, for instance, is known for inherently connecting female slavery to the threat of losing one's children³⁵⁷. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's separation from her daughter is one of the most poignant passages in the book, in Offred's own words, from all of her memories and dreams, "this is the worst"³⁵⁸. In her essay, Varsam thus points out the connection between feminist dystopias and slave narratives³⁵⁹, which both include women's forcible estrangement from their offspring, picking the example of *The Handmaid's Tale* but also of *Swastika Night*, whose women, after the removal of their babies, behave as "bereaved animal[s]", whom "[n]othing could stop [from crying] short of killing them all"³⁶⁰.

Finally, we can consider that slave narratives and feminist dystopias are similar not only in their content but in their aims, which Varsam identifies as a "discourse on freedom, inequality and the nature of domination"³⁶¹.

3.3. The Nature of *The Handmaid's Tale*

But let us go back to a broader approach of Atwood's novel, as we try and assess whether it can actually be called a feminist dystopia and examine the ambiguity of its nature. It may seem an unnecessary debate, as *The Handmaid's Tale* clearly concurs with every aspect mentioned in our definition of the feminist dystopia. Most certainly, one of its main focuses is the oppression of women and the denunciation of misogyny. Yet is that enough to call the novel 'feminist'? Such a question seems sensible when we consider Atwood herself has shied away from the word³⁶². Moreover, in recent

³⁵⁶ An author whose fiction is famous for depicting the challenges faced by African Americans during slavery, she won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993.

³⁵⁷ For example: *A Mercy* (Toni Morrison, 2008) and *Beloved* (Toni Morrison, 1993).

³⁵⁸ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

³⁵⁹ Maria Varsam, "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizon*, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

³⁶⁰ Katharine Burdekin, *Swastika Night*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³⁶¹ Maria Varsam, "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizon*, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

³⁶² According to culture writer Constance Grady, the distinction between a feminist and a human story is one "she[Atwood]'s been trying to make [...] for decades, having spent years dancing around the 'F word'." Grady then quotes Atwood directly: "I didn't want to become a megaphone for any one particular set of beliefs [...] Having gone through that initial phase of feminism when you weren't supposed to wear frocks and lipstick — I never had any use for that. You should be able to wear them without people saying you are a traitor to your sex."

<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/4/25/15407972/Handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood-feminism>, date of access 30/01/2018.

years, Atwood's book has been considered ambivalent about feminism, especially in its "scapegoating"³⁶³ of the anti-porn movement³⁶⁴.

Indeed, what seems most ambiguous regarding the stance of *The Handmaid's Tale* on feminism is the depiction of Offred's mother, as well as her magazine-burning friends³⁶⁵. In the 1980s-1990s, the anti-porn movement proved divisive amongst feminists and those that sought to eradicate pornography exemplified the most 'radical' branch³⁶⁶. It is plain that, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, this movement is not presented under a very good light. The caricatural character of Offred's mother, if intended to give a representation of feminism, is most harmful to the movement. This is not to say that Offred's mother is a completely negative character: she is said to have been active in the sexual liberation movement and is associated with images of resistance³⁶⁷. What is paradoxical about the mother is that, though she clearly represents the extremes of what some people conceive as feminism, she is a profoundly sexist character. For instance, she wonders: "what use are [men] except for ten second's worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy for making other babies"³⁶⁸. Here she is reducing men to their reproductive functions, which is precisely the prevailing form of oppression that Gilead imposes on women. The mother quickly reveals herself not as a feminist character but indeed as what is too often mistaken for feminism, that is to say a misandrist³⁶⁹. Though a liberated woman, she is full of prejudice against men³⁷⁰ and therefore gives a most inaccurate description of feminism

³⁶³ The quote is from a Newstatesman article. Offred's "longing" for hand cream and butter moisturizer are also commented on. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv-radio/2017/04/why-Handmaids-tale-claimed-feminist-when-its-deeply-ambivalent-about>, date of access 30/01/2018.

³⁶⁴ In the late 1970s, some feminists militantly denounced pornography for its (often violent) objectification of women. For example, we can think of Susan Brownmiller's treatise on pornography entitled *Against Our Will*, in which she claims that "Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access." (Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will*. 1975. Ballantine Books 1993, p. 443).

³⁶⁵ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

³⁶⁶ In 1980, the National Organization for Women denounced pornography for its violence against women and sided with the anti-porn feminists. This information was taken from the introduction of Carolyn Bronstein's *Battling Pornography*, which can be read online:

<http://www.cambridgeblog.org/2011/08/the-origins-of-anti-pornography-feminism-by-carolyn-bronstein/>, date of access 30/01/2018.

³⁶⁷ "[...] raising their fists in the air". Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 130.

³⁶⁹ As Kelsey Mo explains in a State Press article, feminism, which is the struggle for equal rights between men and women, is frequently equated with men-hating, associated with such phrases as: "All men are pigs!" <http://www.statepress.com/article/2016/11/spopinion-misandry-is-not-the-same-as-feminism>, date of access 30/01/2018.

³⁷⁰ For example: "they're better at fixing cars and playing football" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

in general. That is without mentioning a deeply ambiguous passage, when Offred reflects on her mother's view of the world: "You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one."³⁷¹ This is troubling especially if we consider that Offred's mother *is* representative of feminism, as Gilead may be interpreted as the direct repercussion of excessive and senseless feminist zeal³⁷². Yet as the mother seems to stand in favor of female domination, it may be read rather more ironically: the mother wanted women to rule and now they are ruled. It is not feminism, really, but the mother's bigotry which is the butt of the joke.

Therefore, we might consider that *The Handmaid's Tale* is critical of those tendencies, of men-hating dressing as feminism, rather than of the movement itself. As Tom Moylan reminds us, dystopias "look [...] skeptically [...] not only at the present society but also at the means needed to transform it"³⁷³.

In fact, Moylan also points to the ambiguity of *The Handmaid's Tale*, indicating that it is ambivalent in more ways than just regarding its feminist stance. Atwood, he tells us, "stretches the creative range of the classical dystopian form, working it in one direction toward anti-utopian closure, then turning it toward a utopian horizon, and then again leaving a space in between for her unresolved questions"³⁷⁴. It is true that this novel takes us in several directions at once: the presence of organized resistance and possible refuge are leaning towards utopian poles, an element which is characteristic of the critical dystopia. In the classical dystopia, in theory, there is no room for optimism, as the point is to demonstrate that once totalitarianism has been allowed to take over, nothing the protagonist may do will make a difference³⁷⁵. The tone of Offred's narrative is different, as this passage illustrates: "It can't last forever. Others have thought such things, in bad times before this, and they were always right"³⁷⁶. Moreover, the "Historical Notes" confirm that Gilead did eventually come to an end.

Yet there is an underlying streak of anti-utopianism, in the book, which expresses doubt as to the possibility of a truly utopian future. Indeed, the "Historical Notes" do

³⁷¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 137.

³⁷² We are, of course, trying to consider how the character of Offred's mother may be viewed by readers, not stating a personal opinion on feminism (from which the mother is poles apart).

³⁷³ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky, op. cit.*, p. 168.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 166.

³⁷⁵ For instance, we may think of Winston's struggle in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell, 1949).

³⁷⁶ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 144.

not quite bring the reader to feel relieved, as the casual misogyny³⁷⁷ of Professor Pieixoto's discourse leaves them with a bitter aftertaste. His condescendence towards Offred and Handmaids³⁷⁸ in general is dismaying. As Tom Moylan points out, it is deeply unsettling and, indeed, anti-utopian, for the reader to have reached the end of Offred's tale only to see her "patronizingly reduce[d] [...] to the reified status of an object of study"³⁷⁹. By the end of the novel, we are brought to realize that Offred's status has not evolved, as she is still dehumanized, the importance of her tale being eclipsed by a crude pun deriding it through its association with a man's "tail"³⁸⁰. In the end, the "Historical Notes" do not serve the purpose of comforting the reader, but the exact opposite. Though Gilead may have ended, it is made very clear that the sexism which was at its roots has not, and perhaps never will. It is essentially in this respect that *The Handmaid's Tale* leans towards anti-utopianism³⁸¹.

Thus, Atwood's novel is at the juncture of two trends of dystopian writing, with scholars disagreeing as to whether to call it classical or critical³⁸². As this dissertation has no ambition of resolving such a debate, it will settle on calling *The Handmaid's Tale*, borrowing Moylan's own term, an "ambiguous dystopia"³⁸³.

Returning to our broader interest in gender relations in Atwood's novel, we might keep in mind that ambiguity is in fact a key word. First, we have seen that the misogyny of Gilead was constructed on things that have existed or still exist in today's society, which makes it ambivalent as regards the line between reality and fiction. We have then studied the relations of power between the inhabitants of Gilead and concluded that, far from being based on a binary division between men and women, it is extremely complex: while even the most victimized members may hold some form of power, the most powerful are themselves, to a certain extent, victims. Finally, we have tried to

³⁷⁷ For example: jokes transforming the "Underground Femaleroad" into the "Underground Frailroad" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

³⁷⁸ For example: when he speaks of Offred's "malicious invention" p. 321, or laments at her lack of "reporter [...] instincts" p. 322. As for the Handmaids, his condescension is most clear when he addresses Particicution, suggesting how "gratifying" it must have been "for these Handmaids [...] to be able to tear a man apart with their bare hands" p. 320.

³⁷⁹ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

³⁸⁰ "I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with [...] the word *tail*" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

³⁸¹ Anti-utopianism must be distinguished from dystopian literature, as it expresses skepticism at the possibility of building a better, or more utopian, society. As Baccolini tells us: "anti-utopia [...] should be reserved for that [...] class of works [...] which are directed against Utopia and utopian thought" "Dystopia and Histories", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁸² Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, *op. cit.*, p. 160-168.

³⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 166.

view *The Handmaid's Tale* no longer in relation to dystopia in general and have shifted our focus to feminist dystopias, before concentrating on the indeed ambiguous nature of Atwood's novel.

Another aspect of the novel which requires our attention, and which is equally ambiguous as regards its position on the utopian or anti-utopian spectrum, is its depiction of resistance against the regime of Gilead. The protagonists' defiance of their totalitarian government is always essential to a dystopia. We will now examine how Atwood's novel handles this issue and whether or not it stays true to the tradition of the genre.

III – Opposing the Regime

“Don’t you want to be free and men? Don’t you even understand what manhood and freedom are?”³⁸⁴

Any dystopia will always more or less clearly answer such questions as what kind of regime is in place, how it got there and how it maintains power. This is what *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does through the inserted manuscript of Emmanuel Goldstein³⁸⁵, and what Offred does in less extensive details, throughout *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Another question which dystopia raises (but does not always answer) is how individuals can turn to resistance, when they have been stripped of all the tools necessary for them to rebel, when they have been indoctrinated and no longer have knowledge of history, when they can no longer use language, when their individuality has been suppressed?

In this part, we shall try to explore how those questions are handled in Atwood’s dystopia, and see how it varies from other classics of the genre.

1. Gilead

Before we examine how resistance is dealt with in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it would be sensible to concentrate on the regime which is being opposed, that is to say Gilead. Dystopian governments share a number of recurring features, which both convey a frightful image of totalitarianism and reveal the author’s apprehensions as to the form that might be taken by absolute power. As we study Atwood’s dystopian regime, we will endeavor to answer three questions: who has the power, what were the historical inspirations for Gilead, and how does it function?

1.1. The Actors

There would be little use in listing all of the powerful figures of Gilead, especially as we have already dealt with some of them in our second part³⁸⁶. Furthermore, general statements can be made about Gilead’s elite, making it unnecessary for us to undertake

³⁸⁴ The Savage in *Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley, *op. cit.*) p. 187.

³⁸⁵ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

³⁸⁶ II – 2. A Redistribution of Power.

such a tedious process of enumeration. The first thing we can note is that Atwood gives a very human portrayal of Gilead's power figures³⁸⁷. We may specify that, here, what we mean by 'human' is: flawed, self-serving and hypocritical. When we consider the passage when Offred remembers a Nazi's mistress who claims her lover "was not a monster"³⁸⁸, it becomes evident that Atwood is interested in humanizing evildoers rather than demonizing them. As a matter of fact, Gilead's elite is not deified or worshipped, as it is the case of many dystopian dictators or party members³⁸⁹. Those in power constantly break the rules for personal benefits: we can think not only of the Commander's escapades to Jezebel's but also of the doctor who takes advantage of the Handmaids and offers Offred to have sex with him³⁹⁰. Such abuse is also suggested of the Aunts³⁹¹ though never confirmed. The elite at large is generally characterized by their hypocrisy. The Commander might be the best example of this, as his duplicity is repeatedly alluded to³⁹².

This emphasis on the fallibility of Gilead's elite may have us wonder how it can realistically impose its dominance on the larger part of the population. Here, Atwood relies on a tool which is found in countless dystopias³⁹³: an effective state police. The function of the guards and the Angels is to frighten the population into a docile behavior, they are a force of dissuasion³⁹⁴. Yet even these figures of violent repression are not dehumanized³⁹⁵ or nearly as horrifying as Orwell's officers³⁹⁶, for instance. The Angels, who are more high-ranked than the guards, are also more difficult to relate

³⁸⁷ We have discussed this in our second part when dealing with the suffering of the Wives and Aunts but also of the ruling men.

³⁸⁸ "He was not a monster, to her. [...] Probably he had some endearing trait: he whistled, off key, in the shower" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

³⁸⁹ For example: *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* Big Brother (George Orwell, *op. cit.*), *Swastika Night's* Hitler (Katherine Burdekin, *op. cit.*).

³⁹⁰ "[...] the knowledge of his [the doctor's] power hangs [...] in the air as he pats my thigh" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 70-71.

³⁹¹ "How much you want to bet she's got Janine down on her knees? What you think they get up to in that office of hers?" *Ibid*, p. 234.

³⁹² For example: "Maybe he believes it, maybe he doesn't, or maybe he does both at the same time." *Ibid*, p. 248. We may also think of the passage before the Ceremony: "[...] he manages to appear puzzled [...] as if we are something he inherited" *ibid*, p. 97.

³⁹³ For example: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1949), *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1953) as well as more recent works such as the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (Alan Moore, 1982).

³⁹⁴ When Offred and Ofglen are going to the market, there are "men with machine guns [...] on either side of the road" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³⁹⁵ The guards "[...] aren't real soldiers", *ibid*, p. 29. A guardian is given an especially unimpressive description: "His face is [...] like a sheep's, but with the large full eyes of a dog, spaniel" p. 31.

³⁹⁶ We can think of the guard with "enormous arms and shoulders [who] let[s] free a frightful blow" against a captured rebel. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

to. Their very title demonstrates that they have become unattainable, which is precisely what makes them an “object of fear”³⁹⁷. Unlike the guards, the Angels do not look at the Handmaids³⁹⁸ or acknowledge their presence. If they did, we may imagine they would restore the Handmaids to their status as human beings. The banning of common exchanges and conversations is what prevents the Angels from being exposed as ordinary men and the Handmaids from being recognized as their equals.

The last element of this state police which we will mention is also the most intimidating, and the most profoundly evocative of the dystopian tradition: we are referring to the Eyes, who illustrate and symbolize the omnipresence of the regime. Characterized by the color black³⁹⁹, Eyes are especially frightening because they could be anyone and, in this sense, they obviously recall Orwell’s thought police⁴⁰⁰. That they are called “Eyes” is in itself an allusion to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which eyes, as in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, represent constant state surveillance, the obliteration of privacy. Yet it is paradoxical that, though “eyes” are used in various metaphors throughout Atwood’s novel⁴⁰¹, and though the threat of people being Eyes (state agents in disguise) is an enduring issue⁴⁰², they never become a concrete danger to Offred. Indeed, though we do encounter them a few times in the novel, most memorably when they grab a man off the street⁴⁰³, they only seem to surround Offred’s narrative, they frame it in mistrust rather than they take part in it. Of course, this is only true if we consider Nick is indeed a member of the Mayday Resistance and not an Eye, and that Offred is saved and not arrested, at the end of the novel. Despite the ambiguity Atwood maintains around Offred’s fate, it is probably more logical to consider that she was indeed rescued, as we know that her narrative will later be recorded through cassettes.

³⁹⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁹⁸ We can think of the guard who “tr[ies] to get a look at [Offred’s] face” *ibid*, p. 31, in contrast with what Offred says of the Angels: “If only they would look at us” *ibid*, p. 14.

³⁹⁹ They ride in black cars, wear dark sunglasses, prompting Offred to think of a “double obscurity” *ibid*, p. 31.

⁴⁰⁰ One of the most shocking moments of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is when Mr. Charrington is revealed as an agent of the thought police (Book 2, chapter X).

⁴⁰¹ For example: the mirror is like “the eye of a fish” Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 19, and there is a hole like a “blind plaster eye” on Offred’s ceiling, p. 61.

⁴⁰² Especially through Nick’s character, whose ambiguity we have already mentioned in our second part.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 178.

Therefore, the Eyes are both omnipresent and missing from the story, which is also the case of another essential dystopian figure: the Grand Inquisitor⁴⁰⁴.

As Erika Gottlieb reminds us, most dystopias include a representative of the regime who will be brought to explain its functioning as well as its purpose to the dystopian hero(ine). This character, whom Gottlieb refers to as the “Grand Inquisitor”, will always be opposed to the protagonist. We may think, for instance, of Winston and O’Brien⁴⁰⁵, of the Controller and the Savage⁴⁰⁶, and of D-503 and the Benefactor⁴⁰⁷. The “revelation scene” when the protagonist will be let in on “the machinery of injustice at the heart of the regime”⁴⁰⁸ is a central aspect of dystopian fiction, as it provides the reader with crucial information. The “Grand Inquisitor” is the last power figure we will focus on, in this subpart, although in the case of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we might call him a missing figure. Indeed, as we have already pointed out, there is no room for a worshipped dictator, in Atwood’s novel: we encounter no main antagonist who embodies at once the terrible might and the persuasive appeal of the regime. Yet it is a figure which we must examine, as its essence is positively present in the novel, its attributes shared by a number of characters. An anchorman on the news channel is the first character to evoke this dystopian benevolent dictator. Offred describes him as “kindly, fatherly”, “everybody’s ideal grandfather”⁴⁰⁹. The part he plays is clear through his infantilization of the masses⁴¹⁰, which is directly inspired by Dostoevsky’s poem, quoted earlier in this paper. For the main part of the novel, however, the role of the “Grand Inquisitor” is taken on by Offred’s Commander, with his “daddyish”⁴¹¹ looks. Most notably, he is Offred’s interlocutor during the revelation scene⁴¹². Unlike most of his dystopian counterparts, he does not claim to have been acting for the good of the masses, as is made clear when he tells Offred: “Better never means better for everyone.”⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁴ This is how Gottlieb refers to the figure of the Benefactor/Dictator in dystopias, borrowing from Dostoevsky’s “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor”, in *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁴⁰⁵ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰⁶ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰⁷ Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰⁸ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁴⁰⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁴¹⁰ “What he’s telling us, his level smile implies, is for our own good. Everything will be all right soon. [...] You must trust. You must go to sleep, like good children.” *Ibid*, p. 93.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 193.

⁴¹² We may locate this scene p. 221-222, as the Commander gives the main reasons for the installment of Gilead.

⁴¹³ *Ibid*, p. 222.

Now that we have studied the main representatives of power in Gilead, we may move on to the regime itself which, true to the dystopian tradition, borrows from numerous oppressive governments which have existed in history.

1.2. A Reconstruction and a Critique of History

Raffaella Baccolini evokes the paradoxical relationship between history and dystopia, which on the one hand requires a “suspension” from history and on the other “is immediately rooted in [it]”⁴¹⁴. Indeed, if dystopias generally take place in a time and place remote from the reader’s, they are always a critique of the society in which they were written and, in that sense, very closely linked with history⁴¹⁵. In fact, most fictional dystopias are modeled on concrete dystopias. We can take the example of *Swastika Night*, which imagines where Hitler’s fascist ideology will take the world if a global war should be won by Nazi Germans. *Brave New World* also blends fact and fiction as it makes clear references to Fordism⁴¹⁶ and to Vladimir Lenin through the character of Lenina. For a more recent example, we can think of *The Man in the High Castle*⁴¹⁷ by Phillip K. Dick, whose story-world is ruled by the here victorious Axis Powers of World War II.

Like these pioneering works, Atwood uses existing totalitarian regimes to shape her fictional theocracy. We might actually connect this with the fiction theories which this paper has already discussed, as the fact that Atwood draws inspiration directly from history strengthens the link between her story-world and reality. Indeed, this is another instance in which Atwood does not construct but reconstruct, by basing her dystopian government partly on the totalitarian regimes that have left a horrifying mark on the twentieth century.

Firstly, we may note the numerous parallels between Gilead and Nazi Germany, which are established by the analogies between the Jews, the martyrs of World War II, and women, who are the scapegoats of Gilead⁴¹⁸. Moreover, we learn in the “Historical Notes”, that scientific theories were used to justify the regime, among which

⁴¹⁴ Raffaella Baccolini, “Memory and Historical Reconciliation”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁴¹⁵ “Utopia [and dystopia] is in fact a product of history and of the periods in which it has been created” *Ibid*, p. 114.

⁴¹⁶ The reference is made clear through the substitution of “OUR LORD” by “OUR FORD”, Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁴¹⁷ Dick, Phillip. *The Man in the High Castle*. 1962. Penguin Classics 2001.

⁴¹⁸ We have already addressed this parallel in II – 2.3. **Beyond Genders**.

Darwinism, also “used by earlier ideologies”⁴¹⁹. Here, it is difficult not to see a connection with Nazi race policies⁴²⁰. The colonies, additionally to evoking slave plantations, are also reminiscent of death camps⁴²¹, which naturally recall the German concentration camps. Moreover, though it is not remembered as the most striking feature of Nazism, misogyny was at the heart of their ideology, which sought to control women’s sexuality so as to preserve racial purity⁴²². As Jack Holland tells us, “[t]he true German woman rejected lipstick, high heels, and nail varnish in favour of becoming a sort of primordial milkmaid”⁴²³, a portrait which fully concords with Gilead’s definition of a good woman⁴²⁴.

We can argue that Communist Russia was another historical inspiration for Gilead, mainly evoked through the purges⁴²⁵ and the Salvagings. The latter, which consist in public, televised executions, are reminiscent of the Moscow “show trials”⁴²⁶, which are meant to terrorize the population and in which the guiltiness of the accused has already been determined. This is important, especially if we consider that rigged trials are a recurrent characteristic of dystopian novels. To Erika Gottlieb, they have “the combined function of religious theatre, political propaganda and [...] releasing the frustration of the masses”⁴²⁷. In this respect, *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* Salvagings as well as Particution are very similar to *Nineteen Eighty-Four’s* “Two Minutes Hate”⁴²⁸, in which the masses are urged to shout abuse and condemn the enemies of the state.

Those references are hardly surprising, as the totalitarian regimes of Russia and Germany were the main inspiration for twentieth-century dystopias⁴²⁹. However, the

⁴¹⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 319.

⁴²⁰ More to be read here: <https://www.trueorigin.org/holocaust.php>, date of access 22/02/2018.

⁴²¹ The colonies where people are made to clean up toxic waste, they have “three years maximum”, Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 260.

⁴²² Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny, op. cit.*, p. 220.

⁴²³ *Ibid*, p. 221.

⁴²⁴ We have examined it in II – 1.2. **Misogyny and Religion, a) Good Girls.**

⁴²⁵ “[...] the middle-period Great Purge” Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 318, is evocative of the “Great Purge” or “Great Terror” which took place from 1934-1939 under Joseph Stalin. More to be read: <https://russiapedia.rt.com/of-russian-origin/stalins-purges/>, date of access 22/02/2018.

⁴²⁶ <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/russia-1900-to-1939/the-show-trials-in-the-ussr/>, date of access 22/02/2018.

⁴²⁷ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West, op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁴²⁸ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four, op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁴²⁹ We have already cited Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (1937) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), the latter having obviously been inspired only by the Russian revolution as it was written before the advent of Nazism. We may add the examples of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell, 1948) and *Fahrenheit 451* (Ray Bradbury, 1955).

central historical period which Atwood borrows from is far less frequent in the genre and dates back to the colonial period of America. Gilead is, indeed, a return to the Puritan Era, as is indicated by its insistence on “traditional values”⁴³⁰ and its apparent piousness. This sets Gilead apart from most dystopian governments for several reasons. To begin with, the majority of them are secular, God being replaced by the figure of the worshipped dictator. This is the case of Big Brother in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and of Hitler in *Swastika Night*. On the contrary, Gilead apparently rests on a strict following of the old testament. Its denying of consumer goods and insistence on plainness make it entirely opposed to the New State of *Brave New World*, whose aim is to keep the masses entertained and satisfied, at the expense of their freedom. In this sense, Gilead blends archaic and futuristic elements⁴³¹. It is a place of hybridity, between a remote past and a speculative future, and through its inextricable connection with the external world, between reality and fiction. Yet, though Gilead is obviously set in a religious frame, we may argue it is far from being religious at the core. Of all of the powerful figures that we encounter in the novel, few appear to be genuinely devout people. In fact, although Atwood probably intended her fiction to be a warning against the rise of fundamentalism, excessive religiosity is not what comes under attack, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Rather, we will demonstrate that the piousness of Gilead is an act, is nothing but a pretext for power. This make-believe is central to the functioning of Gilead as a dystopian government.

1.3. The Mechanisms of Dystopian Rule

a) A Regime based on Make-Believe

It is with a double meaning in mind that we have referred to the authority figures of Gilead as “actors”. Certainly, they are attired with religious imagery, they are the “Sons of Jacob”⁴³² and the “Angels”⁴³³, and in the same vein, they have founded an ostensibly religious government called “Gilead”⁴³⁴, with stores called “Milk and

⁴³⁰ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁴³¹ For instance, the machines depicted in the “Soul Scrolls” chapters are clearly futuristic, whereas there is an absence of the technology hinted at in the analepses before Gilead (with the “Compucards” and “Compudocs” for example, *ibid*, p. 187).

⁴³² *Ibid*, p. 318.

⁴³³ *Ibid*, p. 14.

⁴³⁴ The “hill of testimony, (Genesis 31:21), a mountainous region east of Jordan.”
<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/gilead/>, date of access 23/02/2018.

Honey”⁴³⁵ and “Rachel and Leah Centres”. However, it is only a façade, a pretense of holiness. Atwood’s government is no more religious than Orwell’s is socialist. The “Soul Scrolls” is perhaps the best passage to illustrate this idea that Gilead is structured on religion but devoid of religiosity⁴³⁶. We can also think of the moment when Offred addresses God directly: “I don’t believe for an instant that what’s going on out there is what you meant.”⁴³⁷

It is frequently hinted at that the people in charge are playing a part⁴³⁸. On the side of the authority, religion is rather a disguise than a genuine ideology. In fact, the only truly religious people that are depicted in the novel are the rebels who assist Moira after her escape⁴³⁹. It is interesting to note that the rebels as well as the government’s troops are described as religious factions⁴⁴⁰. This supports the theory that Atwood is not denouncing religion but rather the fact that it may be used as a cover for tyrannical power and to undermine individual liberties. In the end, if not to install a pious administration, Gilead does not seem to have an actual purpose, aside from acquiring power. We can but agree with Erika Gottlieb that *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s regime was never consistent, as a utopian premise, but merely a drastic solution to a crisis which an elite used to seize power⁴⁴¹.

This is one way in which Atwood’s dystopia strays from classics of the genre such as *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451*: it never tries to convince that the happiness of the masses was part of its ideology. Another important difference is that Gilead, as opposed to most dystopian regimes, is flawed and essentially weak. To begin with, it is contained to the United States, whereas such works as that of Orwell and Burdekin portray dystopias that have spread to a large part of the world. Moreover, it is threatened by active bodies of resistance and, perhaps most importantly, even its elite

⁴³⁵ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁴³⁶ There are “five different prayers [...] You pick the one you want, punch in the number [...] so your account will be debited” Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 204.

⁴³⁸ For example, when the Aunt, at the Red Centre, acts as if “God on a cloud of Pink Pearl face powder were coming down through the wires” *ibid*, p. 56. This is an absurd image which exposes the ridiculous masquerade of devoutness enacted by the Aunts. Another passage which suggests acting can be found p. 65 “But we weren’t supposed to care about our complexions anymore, she’d forgotten that.” This gives the impression that the Aunts are playing a role, that their attitude is an act.

⁴³⁹ Their behavior is clearly closer to a Christian model of solidarity as they “risk[...] their lives” for strangers for “religious reasons”, *ibid*, p. 259.

⁴⁴⁰ The rebels are “Baptist[s]” and “heretical [...] Quakers” *ibid*, p. 92-93.

⁴⁴¹ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West, op. cit.*, p. 103-105.

(both male and female) is dissatisfied with the regime⁴⁴². As Tom Moylan puts it, there are “contradictions” in Gilead, far closer to the surface than “in many of the dystopian accounts of authoritarian states”⁴⁴³. So, it is clear, quite early on, that however Gilead maintains power, it will not be able to keep it for very long.

b) The Rule of Terror

In her preface to *Brave New World*, Atwood opposes two powerful visions of totalitarianism, Huxley’s, which favors “hypnotic persuasion”, and Orwell’s, far more brutal, offering “the discouraging spectacle of a boot grinding into the human face”⁴⁴⁴. As we are studying the mechanisms of Atwood’s dystopian government, we may ask ourselves where it stands on this spectrum, if it is closer to *Brave New World*’s soma-induced docility⁴⁴⁵ or to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s ruthless repression. Though Offred sometimes suspects that she and other servants in Gilead may have been drugged to prevent them from revolting⁴⁴⁶, there is no doubt that the methods used to oppress women do not shy from physical violence⁴⁴⁷. However, even though it may be used as a tool by totalitarian regimes, one would have trouble to see how Gilead or any such government could be founded entirely on violence. As Hannah Arendt points out, though they usually appear together, “[n]o government exclusively based on the means of violence has ever existed”⁴⁴⁸. In fact, “[p]ower and violence are opposites”⁴⁴⁹, as the former is only a means of the finest safeguard against rebellion: that is to say, terror.

Terror, unlike violence, enables an enduring domination by an elite. It is different from violence inasmuch as “[it] turns not only against its enemies but against its friends”⁴⁵⁰. Terror involves the threat of violence, not only against an individual but against their loved ones, as well as the impossibility to rely on anyone. This is clearly the case in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in which the Handmaids are made to spy on each

⁴⁴² The Wives suffer from their husbands’ relations with Handmaids, while the Commanders (Offred’s, at least) are visibly lonely and unhappy.

⁴⁴³ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁴⁴⁴ Margaret Atwood’s preface to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

⁴⁴⁵ *Soma* is a drug distributed to the masses in Huxley’s novel.

⁴⁴⁶ For example: “We were on some kind of pill or drug I think, they put it in the food, to keep us calm.” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 80. Another example with the victims at the Salvagings: “[...] she’s definitely drugged. There’s a groggy off-centre smile on her mouth” *ibid*, p. 287.

⁴⁴⁷ Torture is hinted at especially by Moira (*ibid*, p. 256).

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 50.

⁴⁴⁹ Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. Harvest Book Harcourt Inc. 1970, p. 56.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 55.

other⁴⁵¹ and even Offred's lover, Nick, might turn out to be double-agent. In this respect, Atwood follows the same pattern as Orwell's dystopia, in which children are made to turn on parents and vice versa⁴⁵². Moreover, just like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, (and in *Swastika Night* before that), Gilead is at war, and that war is used as an instrument to subdue and manipulate the masses. Though the war against the rebels is perhaps not a complete masquerade, as it is the case in Oceania (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*), there are hints that part of it may be fabricated⁴⁵³. War also plays a part in creating an atmosphere of terror, as it provides Gilead with war prisoners and therefore with executions⁴⁵⁴.

Finally, the terror of Atwood's regime is based on human sacrifice, which Erika Gottlieb argues is a recurring feature in dystopia and close to a religious ritual⁴⁵⁵. Full control over the population requires the frequent killing of scapegoats, which will dissuade people from rising against the regime. To illustrate this, we can obviously think of the Salvagings, but also of the man who is taken by the Eyes, a passage we have already referred to⁴⁵⁶. Such displays of power from the regime are used to maintain a state of perpetual terror, with no knowledge as to who will turn out to be a member of the government or who their next victim will be.

c) Control over Truth

Another recurring feature of dystopian regimes is their capacity to decide what is or is not true, their reform of language and their rewriting of history. No dystopia has made a better demonstration of how powerful such a tool is than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*⁴⁵⁷. In fact, Orwell's creation of Newspeak was such a success that it has raised elevated standards for any writer who would follow into the dystopian tradition. For instance, critic Mary McCarthy, whom we have already mentioned, resents Atwood's novel for its "inability to imagine a language to match the changed face of common

⁴⁵¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁴⁵² George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four, op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴⁵³ For example: "I'm ravenous for news, any kind of news; even if it's false news, it must mean something" Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁴⁵⁴ Indeed, though the people executed at the Salvagings are often members of the society who have committed a fault, we can imagine some of them are actually rebels, just like the man who is executed by the Handmaids at the Particicution (*ibid*, p. 292).

⁴⁵⁵ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West, op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴⁵⁶ "They pick him up and heave him into the back of the van [...] What I feel is relief. It wasn't me." Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 179.

⁴⁵⁷ In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell, *op. cit.*) the masses will soon no longer even have the necessary words to question the legitimacy of the regime.

life”⁴⁵⁸. Comparing *The Handmaid’s Tale* to *A Clockwork Orange* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, McCarthy deems its lack of a new language “a serious defect, unpardonable maybe for the genre”. Like the rest of McCarthy’s review, this appears somewhat unreasonable. It may be relevant to point out that dystopian classics such as *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451* invent no such language as Newspeak and yet do not become, as McCarthy claims, “powerless to scare”. This criticism also fails to take into account the control that Gilead exerts over language: in fact, it is hinted several times that language as we know it has disappeared⁴⁵⁹. Moreover, as we have already stated, language (for the Handmaids at least) is forbidden, is replaced by platitudes⁴⁶⁰. Some words (like “sterile”⁴⁶¹) are erased while others (such as “Econowife”, “Unbaby” and “Unwomen”) are created. On a purely generic point of view, those new words are what Irène Langlet would call “triggers of alterity”⁴⁶², they participate in shaping what the reader will perceive as an unfamiliar atmosphere⁴⁶³. On a strategic level, their purpose is the indoctrination of the masses of Gilead, much as it is the case for the people of Oceania.

Moreover, Gilead’s control over truth does not limit itself to language: it is also expressed through the reshaping of history⁴⁶⁴. This is another frequent feature of dystopia, as is illustrated by the slogan of *Brave New World*: “History is bunk.”⁴⁶⁵ Of course, a people’s history is essential to its relation to the world and to the way they represent themselves as individuals. To use the words of Raffaella Baccolini: “History, its knowledge, and memory are [...] dangerous elements that can give the dystopian

⁴⁵⁸ McCarthy’s full book review can be read here:

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/26/specials/mccarthy-atwood.html?mcubz=3>, date of access 23/02/2018.

⁴⁵⁹ For example, when the doctor speaks to Offred: “‘How are we getting along?’ he says, some tic of speech from the other time.” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 70. We can also think of when the Commander greets her: “‘Hello,’ he says. It’s the old form of greeting. I haven’t heard it for [...] years” *ibid*, p. 147.

⁴⁶⁰ “[...] the same slogans, the same phrases” *ibid*, p. 286.

⁴⁶¹ “[...] he’s said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing [...] only women who are fruitful and women who are barren” *ibid*, p. 70-71.

⁴⁶² Dans la langue originale, « déclencheurs d’altérité ». Irène Langlet, *La science-fiction : lecture et poétique d’un genre littéraire*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁴⁶³ « Le déploiement cognitif d’un mot-fiction peut [...] engager une étrangeté au moins aussi grande que celle d’un discours énigmatique ou d’un cadre civilisationnel inconnu » *Ibid*, p. 32.

⁴⁶⁴ For example: “It’s only the more recent history that offends them” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁴⁶⁵ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

citizen a potential instrument of resistance.”⁴⁶⁶ In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the regime also controls history in the making by controlling the news, strictly regulating the information that can be given to the masses⁴⁶⁷.

Finally, Gilead expresses control over reality through its capacity to deny it. In asserting that sterility does not exist among men⁴⁶⁸, for example, the regime appropriates truth, and in so doing, maintains its dominance over the subjected population. The most interesting example is perhaps Gilead’s attempt to convince women that they have not lost their freedom, that they used to be “free[...] to” and now they are “free[...] from”⁴⁶⁹, which in other words means that though they have lost the ability to choose for themselves or to do anything, they are protected, free from danger. It amounts to an exercise in doublethink, rejecting truth and logic in favor of the regime’s doctrine⁴⁷⁰.

Though we do not have time to extend on all of the mechanisms of Gilead, we can mention another few which are especially relevant: segregation, as well as the division of women into categories⁴⁷¹, and the uniformization of the masses, which is linked to their dehumanization. Now that we have given a brief overview of the functioning of Gilead, we must move on to the people whom it oppresses, beginning with what becomes of the human under such drastic circumstances.

2. The Human and Dystopia

Before we go any further, it is necessary for us to explain what we mean when we talk about “the human”, and we will borrow the definition given by Professor Laurent Fedi: “À la question « qu’y a-t-il d’humain dans l’homme ? », la philosophie la plus orthodoxe [...] a néanmoins une réponse : la liberté, la raison, le langage, la

⁴⁶⁶ Raffaella Baccolini, “Memory and Historical Reconciliation”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁴⁶⁷ “[...] who knows if any of it [the news] is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked.” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 92. “They show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news?” *Ibid*, p. 93.

⁴⁶⁸ This follows the biblical tradition, according to which sterility exists only among women (Josy Eisenberg, *Les femmes au temps de la Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 31).

⁴⁶⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁴⁷⁰ We find that most dystopian regimes are capable of utterly denying what is true. For example, we can think of *Swastika Night* (Katharine Burdekin, *op. cit.*), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell, *op. cit.*), *Fahrenheit 451* (Ray Bradbury, *op. cit.*), etc.

⁴⁷¹ Each group is represented by a different color. The color red, attributed to the Handmaids, evidently recalls *The Scarlet Letter* (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1850) through its association with lust and social stigma.

conscience, l'intersubjectivité"⁴⁷². If we agree with him, it is easy to see why Atwood's novel (and dystopia in general) should be concerned with what becomes of the human in the setting of a totalitarian regime, whose aim, according to Erika Gottlieb, is precisely to transform it⁴⁷³. It is relevant for us to focus on this before we move on to the portrayal of resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as the definition and the struggle of the human⁴⁷⁴ in dystopian regimes is paramount to understanding what brings people to resist or to conform to tyrannical rule. Since we have just studied how Gilead subdues its population, we may as well begin by why it may be easier to conform to the regime. If indeed, to use the words of Angela Carter, "terror is the most seductive of all drugs"⁴⁷⁵.

2.1. Conforming to the Regime

Though *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on few concrete examples of people who have been broken by the regime⁴⁷⁶, it is very specific as to how it happens. Atwood uses devices which are frequently found in dystopia. The first is the focus on the crowd⁴⁷⁷, which undermines the humanity and therefore the responsibility of the individual. Rather than giving a definition of mob mentality, we may use that of Hungarian writer Béla Hamvas, who claims that "[t]he rule of the mob means that individual [...] activities are taken over by the mob's confused, blind, hazy and non-conscious activities, and in the process the human experience becomes blurred and sinks under."⁴⁷⁸ In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the mob is indeed linked with the disappearance of individuality, as is illustrated by the passages of the rape-shaming⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷² Fedi, Laurent. « L'humain en philosophie : la parenthèse de la culpabilité », *Le Philosophoire*. Vol. 23, N° 2. 2004, p. 134.

⁴⁷³ "[...] the ultimate purpose of the totalitarian state is the transformation of human nature" Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁴⁷⁴ As Naomi Jacob tells us, "The classic dystopian text [adopts] the humanist perspective, in which the [...] individual is the measure of all things [...] This notion of the human assumes individual subjectivity as a natural essence rather than a social construct." Naomi Jacobs, "Posthuman Bodies and Agency" in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁴⁷⁵ Angela Carter, *Passion of New Eve*, *op. cit.*, p.15.

⁴⁷⁶ The most obvious character we can think of here is Janine. "[...] by that time Janine was like a puppy that's been kicked too often [...] she'd tell anything, just for a moment of approbation." Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁴⁷⁷ We can take the dystopian example of *Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley, *op. cit.*): the Deltas who refuse the Savage's rebellion become an "interminable stream" of people with one face, p. 177.

⁴⁷⁸ Hamvas, Béla. *A Lathatatlan Történet*. 1943. Hermész könyvek 1988, p. 18. Translation by Erika Gottlieb (*Dystopian Fiction East and West*, p. 158).

⁴⁷⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

and Particicution⁴⁸⁰. The “Birthday” chapters perhaps offer the best example, as the chanting women truly become one and the same: “We’re with her, we’re the same as her, we’re drunk”⁴⁸¹.

This emphasis on the collective is especially interesting if we link it with the reason why the masses support dictatorship in the first place. In her study on dystopia, Erika Gottlieb argues that the twentieth century was marked by a loss of faith in “personal immortality”, which totalitarian regimes replaced with a “promise of collective immortality”⁴⁸². Losing one’s individuality for the sake of belonging to a community therefore becomes not only the result of totalitarian rule but its motive.

Another device Gilead uses to ensure its population’s obedience is the turning of victims into victimizers⁴⁸³. Particicution is, once again, an obvious example, as the Handmaids, whom we may consider as the most alienated class of Gilead’s society⁴⁸⁴, are given the “privilege” of executing an enemy of the state. As we have seen in our second part, granting power to each oppressed category is key to the functioning of the regime, and it is frequently found in the dystopian tradition⁴⁸⁵. As Gottlieb points out, “allowing the victims to act as executioners [...] is probably the [...] most important ritual expressing the [...] mechanism of dictatorship”⁴⁸⁶. This goes beyond the hierarchization of the people of Gilead which we have already mentioned. Indeed, by partaking in those vicious executions, the victims of Gilead *become* Gilead⁴⁸⁷.

This is due to the regime’s power of indoctrination, for which the people are not responsible. Yet Atwood’s novel is sometimes ambiguous as to this issue, as it criticizes people’s passivity in the face of totalitarianism. Several times, it is hinted that there has been relatively little protest, before the installation of Gilead⁴⁸⁸.

⁴⁸⁰ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 135-136.

⁴⁸² Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁴⁸³ *Cf II – 2.1. Women’s Hierarchy of Privilege.*

⁴⁸⁴ In Gilead, the Handmaids are the most “exploited class and thus the most alienated” Maria Varsam, “Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

⁴⁸⁵ For example, in *Swastika Night* (Katharine Burdekin, *op. cit.*), this classification is very clear: “As a woman is above a worm, So is a man above a woman. As a woman is above a worm, So is a worm above a Christian [...]” p. 7.

⁴⁸⁶ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁴⁸⁷ For example: “That’s one of the things they do. They force you to kill, within yourself” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 203. Or: at the Salvagings, the Handmaids “touch the rope” to demonstrate their “consent [and] complicity in the death” *ibid*, p. 288. Most remarkably: “Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you” *ibid*, p. 33.

⁴⁸⁸ “There were marches, of course [...] But they were smaller than you might have thought” *ibid*, p. 189.

Moreover, Atwood attacks people's capacity to ignore what makes them uncomfortable and to get used to intolerable situations for the sake of personal security⁴⁸⁹. Of course, this is not specific to Atwood's dystopia. Already, the masses' responsibility was central in Dostoevsky's "Grand Inquisitor": "they will submit to us gladly [...] they will be glad to believe our answer, for it will save them from the great anxiety [...] of] making a free decision"⁴⁹⁰. This perfectly describes the behavior of the population of Huxley's *Brave New World* and that of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, in which entertainment is ultimately preferable to personal fulfillment and independence. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the masses are given no such satisfying distractions and yet, they are conditioned to fear freedom all the same⁴⁹¹. That is the power of Gilead's indoctrination: its subjects find a form of relief in being erased as individuals, in becoming only what the state expects of them⁴⁹². This is what Offred calls Gilead's "true power"⁴⁹³.

We see, therefore, that Atwood's position regarding the masses' responsibility is ambivalent. In a way, it makes sense that she should emphasize their role in allowing for a totalitarian government to take over. As we have already stated, dystopia works as a warning, its aim is to convince the reader that changes must occur in their society to prevent such a regime from taking over. In fact, we may note that it is only prior to the installment of Gilead that people's irresponsible behavior is emphasized, as what follows (people's participation in criminal activities, their assimilation of Gilead's doctrine) is presented as natural, or at least understandable, in the context of a dictatorship.

Indeed, if we agree with Fedi that the human is primarily characterized by freedom, language and reason, we see plainly that those are things which dystopian regimes seek to destroy, thus the ideal dystopian citizen will no longer be human at all, but a being utterly denaturalized, taught to be afraid of the very things that make them a human

⁴⁸⁹ For example: "We lived as, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 66. Or: "[...] it was better to be lethargic. You could tell yourself you were saving up your strength" *ibid*, p. 80.

⁴⁹⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor" as quoted by Erika Gottlieb (*Dystopian Fiction East and West, op. cit.*, p. 53).

⁴⁹¹ "Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure" Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 143.

⁴⁹² For example: "His approbation laps me like a warm bath" *ibid*, p. 193. Atwood also speaks of the "ecstasy of abasement [...] Oh God, obliterate me [...] Mortify my flesh that I may be [...] fulfilled" *ibid*, p. 204.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 298: Offred is willing to become what Gilead wants her to be, "I'll empty myself [...] become a chalice [...] Everything they taught at the Red Centre, everything I've resisted comes flooding in."

being⁴⁹⁴. Therefore, it is logical that the human should best emerge in opposition to the regime.

2.2. A Contradiction between the Human and Totalitarianism

Erika Gottlieb's definition of the human also stresses its inherent contradiction with the dystopian regime which "eliminate[s] [...] free will and individuality, the essential components of being human"⁴⁹⁵. Then we may argue that the human defines itself precisely in its defiance of the regime. We may, for instance, think of the Savage's rejection of the New State, as he chooses freedom over the illusion of happiness: "I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin."⁴⁹⁶ If scholar Lucas Degryse is right when he claims self-destruction is at the heart of human beings⁴⁹⁷, who are characterized by irreconcilable contradictions⁴⁹⁸, then we might see the Savage's declaration as an epitome of humanity. However, we must note that his behavior is completely opposed to Offred's, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, who is in ways more lifelike, concerned with avoiding pain and willing to compromise, in order to lead a life as comfortable as her situation will allow.

In fact, the human in dystopia is rarely portrayed in a glorious light. For instance, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston is willing to commit terrible deeds for the sake of the Brotherhood, from the murder of innocent people to "throw[ing] sulphuric acid in a child's face"⁴⁹⁹. Dystopias aim to show that, in such a setting as a totalitarian government, human beings can take a turn for the worse, and *The Handmaid's Tale* does so with chilling efficiency⁵⁰⁰. This literary genre is not intended to introduce us

⁴⁹⁴ In Michel Bay's *Dictionnaire des concepts philosophiques* (2003), freedom is also placed at the core of what defines human beings: "[...] l'homme est le résultat toujours changeant de la réalisation continue des hommes, le produit de leur acte libre [...] l'homme se saisit comme le projet et le produit d'un « agir »". The word "homme" here refers to humankind, though we have preferred to use the word "human", for obvious reasons.

⁴⁹⁵ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 77-78.

⁴⁹⁶ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁴⁹⁷ « C'est [...] dans la trahison de l'humain, dans la destruction de l'humain, donc dans l'auto-destruction, que l'humain donne sens à sa vie. » Degryse, Lucas. « L'auto-destruction comme essence de l'humain », *Le Philosophoire*. Vol. 23, N° 2. 2004, p. 120.

⁴⁹⁸ « L'humain est ainsi irréconciliable avec lui-même [...] l'humain est un sujet divisé » *ibid*, p. 120.

⁴⁹⁹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

⁵⁰⁰ For example, when Offred tries to escape with her daughter: "by myself I could run faster [...] I think about her drowning and this thought slows me" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

to likeable characters, but to reveal even the most uncomfortable aspects of human behavior. In the words of scholar Lucy Sargisson: “[...] ordinary people are capable of horrific acts. Give [them] an account of the world that legitimizes callousness [...] and [...] they will act accordingly.”⁵⁰¹

In the end, the transformation of the human “in the cauldron of totalitarian violence” is perhaps the most brutal aspect of dystopia, resulting in the loss of man’s “innate yearning for freedom”⁵⁰². The best example for this is Winston’s conversion in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as he has become, by the end of the novel, a true believer⁵⁰³. Though there might be more hope for Offred, she does undergo a similar process: “I resign my body freely, to the uses of others [...] I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power.”⁵⁰⁴ Throughout her novel, Atwood uses several images to suggest how the tyrannical state transforms individuals⁵⁰⁵, the most gripping of which is through a parallel with the Jews who died in the concentration camps: “I thought these people [the Jews] had been eaten. Which in a way I suppose they had been.”⁵⁰⁶

Yet if the human is grinded by Gilead, it does not mean that there is no room for resistance. Moreover, the latter is not only limited to organized resistance, but begins on a much smaller scale. If indeed the regime’s aim is to obliterate individualism, resistance begins with reclaiming oneself.

Now that we have examined the contradictions between the human and totalitarian regimes, we may move on to how opposition against the regime is depicted, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

3. Asserting Oneself Against the Regime

According to Naomi Jacobs, the “ideal citizen of dystopia [...] has no self to express”, as the regime will destroy “any kind of identity [...] separable from [...] the collective”⁵⁰⁷. True to the dystopian tradition, Atwood’s characters are alienated from

⁵⁰¹ Lucy Sargisson, “Utopia in Dark Times”, in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons, op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁵⁰² Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West, op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁵⁰³ “[...] everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.” George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four, op. cit.*, p. 376.

⁵⁰⁴ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 298.

⁵⁰⁵ For example, at the Red Centre, Offred reflects on the Aunts: “We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives.” *Ibid*, p. 124. In fact, that the Handmaids’ education is taking place in a former school further stresses the parallel between Aunts and teachers. The women are literally reformed.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 155.

⁵⁰⁷ Naomi Jacobs, “Posthuman Bodies and Agency” in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons, op. cit.*, p. 92.

themselves, are owned by others⁵⁰⁸, are no longer free agents according to Jacobs' definition⁵⁰⁹. The first step of their rebellion must therefore be the reassertion of their individualities, as "without a clear sense of self [they] will feel no need to rebel"⁵¹⁰. This is something which Atwood's protagonist does by reminding herself of her true name⁵¹¹ and repeating the (for a time) mysterious phrase "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*"⁵¹², which is associated to rebellion before Offred even has the means to decipher it. First, because it is a written message and Offred is forbidden to read, but also because it has been passed on to her from the Handmaid who lived in that room before her. Because it is secret and forbidden, this exchange is meaningful, there is a genuine intention behind it, it is not a mere empty repetition of the regime's doctrine. Most especially, Offred reclaims herself through storytelling, which is the ultimate act of resistance, as we will study more closely in a later part of this dissertation.

3.1. Figures of Rebellion

Some critics⁵¹³ have argued that while Atwood's protagonist offers no ideal model for resistance⁵¹⁴, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents us with very strong rebellious figures. We have already mentioned Offred's mother, whose militancy does evoke insubordination, regardless of her ambivalence as a feminist character⁵¹⁵. However, the most obvious character that comes to mind, when we think of rebellion, is Offred's friend Moira, whose defiance of Gilead is primarily sexual⁵¹⁶, both because of her homosexuality and her position at Jezebel's. Though we have emphasized in our second part that the Club offered no real emancipation for women, it can nonetheless be connected to resistance inasmuch as it contradicts everything that the regime (officially) stands for. As Offred states: "The official creed denies [...] their very

⁵⁰⁸ "We are not each other's, anymore. Instead I am his." Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁵⁰⁹ "Agency [...] includ[es] both the capacity to choose for oneself and the capacity to act upon one's choices" Naomi Jacobs, "Posthuman Bodies and Agency" in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹¹ "I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, p. 101. Its meaning is revealed as "Don't let the bastards grind you down" *ibid.*, p. 197.

⁵¹³ We can think, for instance, of Anne Johnson and Peter Stillman ("Identity, Complicity and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*". Vol. 5, N° 2, 1994. *Utopian Studies*. Penn State University Press 1994.)

⁵¹⁴ We will discuss this interpretation of Offred's resistance in our next subpart.

⁵¹⁵ We have discussed this in II – 3.3. **The Nature of *The Handmaid's Tale*.**

⁵¹⁶ In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is "resistance through sexual transgression (Moira)" Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

existence, yet here they are. That is at least something.”⁵¹⁷ Most evidently, Moira becomes a figure of resistance through her escape from the Red Centre⁵¹⁸ and through her association with the underground networks⁵¹⁹. Yet even if we should disregard those open acts of opposition, Moira is described as an inherently rebellious character⁵²⁰. Offred compares her to a cat that “crawls onto the page when you’re trying to read”⁵²¹, a meaningful image if we connect it with what we have said of witches in this novel⁵²².

As we have also lingered on the symbolism of names, we can note that “Moira” is an interesting choice, considering its Greek etymology which associates it with the three female personifications of fate⁵²³. In a novel where anatomy is equated with destiny, we may comment on the ambiguity of such a name: is it its purpose to indicate that fate and male domination are inescapable, or rather to suggest the prevalence of a strong female figure (Moira) over the misogynistic legislation of Gilead? Unfortunately, one should be tempted to lean towards the former, considering the anticlimactic ending given to this character⁵²⁴.

We might argue that what makes Moira such a powerful symbol of resistance is that she becomes a “story”⁵²⁵. Her inspiring escape from the Centre shows the other Handmaids that anything is possible, she becomes larger than life, broadens their horizons with new possibilities. However, as a character, she is only trying to get on as best as she can, like Offred. This is interesting as we consider Offred has repeatedly stated how different she and Moira were⁵²⁶, has defined her own cowardice in opposition to Moira’s bravery. Her disappointment in noting that Moira, too, is just “go[ing] along, sav[ing] her skin”⁵²⁷, reveals how much Offred needs to believe in a resistance against Gilead.

⁵¹⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 247

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 143.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 188.

⁵²⁰ For example: “her hair was short, she’d defied fashion as usual” *ibid*, p. 81.

⁵²¹ *Ibid*, p. 66.

⁵²² Cf II – 1.2. b) **Bad Girls**.

⁵²³ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/moira>, date of access 26/02/2018.

⁵²⁴ At the end, Moira is a bit of a disappointment to Offred: “What I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition” Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 261.

⁵²⁵ “The story [of Moira’s escape] passed among us that night [...] Moira was our fantasy [...] she was with us in secret” *ibid*, p. 143.

⁵²⁶ For example: “I’m not Moira” *ibid*, p. 180.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 261.

As we are dealing with figures of rebellion, we must also address organized resistance, which is rather more developed than in most dystopias⁵²⁸. Indeed, we learn there are two different groups of opposition to Gilead, the Mayday underground and the Underground Femaleroad⁵²⁹. Moreover, we know, as Gilead has obviously met its demise by the end of the novel, that resistance has not been in vain, which is traditionally the case in dystopia⁵³⁰. Therefore, from this angle, we may consider that the opposition triumphs over the regime and that *The Handmaid's Tale* offers, after all, a rather utopian promise. However, such a conclusion would overlook the more private level of rebellion that is depicted in the novel, as well as Offred's controversial attitude to resistance.

3.2. Offred's Relation with Resistance

In their study of *The Handmaid's Tale*⁵³¹, Anne Johnson and Peter Stillman have argued that Atwood's protagonist "fails to maintain her identity"⁵³², that not only her compliance but even her acts of resistance actually go along with Gilead's ideology, as they lead Offred to "defin[e] herself as a body"⁵³³. Here, Stillman and Johnson are referring to Offred's swaying her hips at the young guards⁵³⁴, but her romance with Nick is criticized for the same reasons⁵³⁵.

Obviously, there is much to say about such harsh criticism of Offred's character. At the very least, it is unfair to blame her for being unable to "maintain an identity" in a regime whose very aim is to destroy it, as dystopian characters cannot be held accountable for the failures of their personal resistance⁵³⁶. Moreover, we can find fault in Johnson and Stillman's claim that Offred lacks an identity to begin with. Indeed, Offred often expresses a difficulty in viewing herself as a subject, which makes perfect

⁵²⁸ For instance, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell, *op. cit.*) or in *Swastika Night* (Katharine Burdekin, *op. cit.*), we never meet the Brotherhood which allegedly opposes the regime.

⁵²⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

⁵³⁰ "[...] at best, [the dystopian citizens] might attempt a rebellion, but it will be mercilessly crushed [and] the individual [...] will be reprogrammed, exiled or killed" Naomi Jacobs, "Posthuman Bodies and Agency" in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁵³¹ Stillman and Johnson, "Identity, Complicity and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *art. cit.*

⁵³² *Ibid*, p. 75.

⁵³³ *Ibid*, p. 76.

⁵³⁴ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁵³⁵ Offred's behavior when she is in love is chided as "hardly the expression of an authentic [...] liberated self" Stillman and Johnson, "Identity, Complicity and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *art. cit.*, p. 76.

⁵³⁶ "[...] the entire point of dystopian satire is to emphasize that once we [...] allow the establishment of a totalitarian dictatorship [...] no effort on the part of an individual within that system is capable of ending it." Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

sense in the context of a dystopia. Yet the whole novel seeks to demonstrate that Offred has nevertheless retained an identity, which is in part characterized by a drive towards the subversive.

Offred's attraction towards resistance is most often represented through numerous images of violence⁵³⁷ and through her desire to steal dangerous objects⁵³⁸. Admittedly, Offred never acts on this desire⁵³⁹, but it is constantly alluded to and illustrates at least an inward defiance of the regime. In dystopia, there is such a strong emphasis on the state's power even over individuals' private thoughts⁵⁴⁰ that one should not dismiss thoughts of rebellion as irrelevant. The same could be said about the image of fire, which is used repeatedly in the novel and is, through its connection to witchcraft and its destructive potential, another strong symbol of defiance. Offred is herself associated to fire through the color of her dress⁵⁴¹ and when Serena allows her a cigarette, she keeps the match with the thought that she might "burn the house down"⁵⁴². Yet, once again, nothing comes out of it in the end: Offred does not fulfill her rebellion through fire any more than through violence.

Her only resistance that exceeds the realm of fantasy is sexual, the nature of which Stillman and Johnson resented for its concordance with "the identity Gilead requires"⁵⁴³. However, such a statement fails to acknowledge that though the Handmaids of Gilead are indeed valued only through procreation, the regime does everything it can to desexualize them, so that Offred's reassertion of her sexuality is in no way an abidance of its doctrine. On the contrary, Offred is empowered by it⁵⁴⁴. The link between resistance and nudity itself is alluded to when Offred thinks of "peel[ing] off [her] red shroud and show[ing] [her]self to him [a guard]"⁵⁴⁵, ridding

⁵³⁷ For example: "I would like to strangle her [Aunt Lydia]" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 124. There is also the passage when Offred reflects she is being treated "[...] as if I'm lacking manual skills or teeth. I have both, however. That's why I'm not allowed a knife" *ibid*, p. 240.

⁵³⁸ There are many examples of objects Offred would like to steal and which reflect her drive towards rebellion: "The knife she uses is sharp [...] I would like to have a knife like that." *ibid*, p. 57. "What I coveted was the shears" *ibid*, p. 161.

⁵³⁹ The closer we get is through a fantasy added "only afterwards" by Offred, in which she murders the Commander: "the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands" *ibid*, p. 150.

⁵⁴⁰ Orwell's "thought police" is the most obvious example (George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *op. cit.*).

⁵⁴¹ "This red of mine that sucks in heat and blazes" Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 213. "A wraith of red smoke" *ibid*, p. 219.

⁵⁴² *ibid*, p. 220.

⁵⁴³ Stillman and Johnson, "Identity, Complicity and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *art. cit.*, p. 76.

⁵⁴⁴ "I'm not ashamed at all. I enjoy the power." Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁵⁴⁵ *ibid*.

herself at once of the social stigma embodied by her dress and the sexist concealment of women's bodies, which is linked to the repression of their sexuality⁵⁴⁶.

Yet it is true that these moments of "small defiance"⁵⁴⁷ do not culminate in outright rebellion. Even Offred's participation to the Mayday underground network is treated almost as a fantasy, a way to pass the time⁵⁴⁸. Indeed, Offred cannot see herself as a rebel and, therefore, any actual act of resistance is mediated through the figure of doubles, whom we must briefly extend upon.

There are two main characters that might be interpreted as Offred's doubles. First of all, we can think of Ofglen, who from the beginning is introduced in relation to Offred: "a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red"⁵⁴⁹. As Handmaids, the two women share the same dress and a very similar name. The mirror image is especially clear in this passage: "She [Ofglen]'s like my own reflection, in a mirror from which I am moving away."⁵⁵⁰ That Offred is moving in an opposite direction is an interesting detail: whereas Ofglen is fully committed to the resistance, Offred will indeed "mov[e] away" from the Mayday underground, as we will see in our next subpart. What makes this mirror image further interesting is that, for the main part of the novel, Ofglen is an extremely mysterious character, as there is no telling whether she is "a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name"⁵⁵¹. In fact, in the first stages of the novel, Ofglen appears to the reader exactly as Offred would, if we had no access to her thoughts. In this respect, she is indeed Offred's reflection. Furthermore, the moment when Offred realizes Ofglen is actually a member of the resistance, the first time that they truly look at each other, is through a reflection in a window⁵⁵². There is no doubt that this link between the two Handmaids is associated to rebellion⁵⁵³, as Ofglen is at least for a time Offred's gateway into the Mayday underground. Following the tradition of the fantastic, the figure of the doppelgänger⁵⁵⁴ becomes most disquieting when Ofglen is

⁵⁴⁶ We have developed this in our second part, **1.2. Misogyny and Religion a) Good Girls**.

⁵⁴⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁵⁴⁸ It is described as "childish [...] something you'd do for fun" *ibid*, p. 212.

⁵⁴⁹ *ibid*, p. 28.

⁵⁵⁰ *ibid*, p. 54.

⁵⁵¹ *ibid*, p. 29.

⁵⁵² "Ofglen, reflected in the glass of the window [...] This is the first time I've ever seen Ofglen's eyes." *ibid*, p. 176.

⁵⁵³ "There is risk, suddenly, in the air between us", they cross "the invisible line together" *ibid*, p. 176.

⁵⁵⁴ Freud alludes to the "double" as one of the best examples of what provokes sensations of the uncanny (Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*. 1919, p. 9-10).

replaced by another woman⁵⁵⁵, blurring the boundary between the familiar and the unfamiliar and producing this “uncanny strangeness”⁵⁵⁶ so typical of the fantastic genre.

The second character we may study in this line of thought is the Handmaid who lived in Offred’s room before her, whom Offred calls “my ancestress, my double”⁵⁵⁷. Though we never actually meet her in the novel, she is essential to Offred’s relation to resistance, especially through the message she wrote on the floor, *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Offred will perceive it at times like a prayer⁵⁵⁸, others like a command⁵⁵⁹, and its meaning is obviously defiant (“Don’t let the bastards grind you down”). Moreover, it is clear that Offred wants to see the woman as a rebellious figure, as she associates it with the most rebellious character in the novel, Moira⁵⁶⁰.

In the end, those doubles are a mediation between Offred and direct resistance, prisms through which she contemplates the possibility of opposing the regime without crossing the line.

Yet though we have explored several of Offred’s relations (Moira, Ofglen) and their role in ushering her towards rebellion, we are yet to examine her relationship with Nick, which is both crucial and anticlimactic, as it signals Offred’s move away from the resistance.

3.3. Love: A Paradoxical Role

We have seen in our second part that Offred’s relationship with Nick helped to restore her individuality. Therefore, following what we have said in our last subpart, it is in this sense, subversive. On the one hand, this love interest can be viewed as rather positive, associated to Offred’s defiance of the regime. For instance, when Offred imagines making love with Nick, she reflects “It would be like shouting, it

⁵⁵⁵ When Offred asks: ““Has Ofglen been transferred [...]?”” and the other replies: “I am Ofglen” Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 295.

⁵⁵⁶ A Freudian term translated in French as « inquiétante étrangeté » or « inquiétante familiarité ». It can be defined as a moment when « l’intime surgit comme étranger, inconnu, autre absolu, au point d’en être effrayant. » (Menès, Martine. « L’inquiétante étrangeté ». *La lettre de l’enfance et de l’adolescence*. N° 56. 2004, p. 21-24. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-lettre-de-l-enfance-et-de-l-adolescence-2004-2-page-21.htm>, date of access 02/04/2018). It is recurrent in the fantastic genre (Mérigot, Bernard. « L’Inquiétante Étrangeté. Note sur l’Unheimliche ». *Littérature*. N° 8. 1972, p. 100-106).

⁵⁵⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 305.

⁵⁵⁸ “I pray silently: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*.” *Ibid*, p. 101.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 156.

⁵⁶⁰ “I turn her into Moira” *ibid*, p. 62.

would be like shouting someone”⁵⁶¹, a violent image which is mediated by the voice, the very medium through which Offred relates her tale. Later in the novel, talking will be an essential aspect of their affair, as Offred relates: “I talk too much. I tell him things I shouldn’t”⁵⁶², which prolongs the subversive image of oral speech associated with Offred’s relationship with Nick⁵⁶³.

Yet on the other hand, this relationship is directly connected with Offred’s loss of interest in the resistance. At the end of the novel, Offred no longer listens to what Ofglen says⁵⁶⁴, she no longer even wants to escape from Gilead⁵⁶⁵, and therefore has lost all rebellious quality. In fact, we might say that love has replaced resistance as a means of self-assertion. This is at once unexpected and paradoxical. First, unexpected, because in dystopia, love is generally a trigger for resistance and plays an important role in introducing the protagonist to others who oppose the regime. For instance, we may think of Julia from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or I-330 from *We*, as in both novels the characters become political insurgents through a forbidden and loving relationship. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood reverses this pattern and, instead of taking Offred progressively towards a rebellious outcome, she has her sever from the resistance in favor of a somewhat precipitated romance.

Such a decision is paradoxical in more ways than one. As Atwood’s novel is so deeply entwined with gender issues, we cannot refrain from noting that seeing Offred choose love over resistance is, from a feminist angle, slightly disappointing. As Joanna Russ points out, being the protagonist of a love story is the stereotypical role that heroines struggle to disentangle from⁵⁶⁶, their lives being widely portrayed as revolving around men. Under this light, Offred’s sudden infatuation with Nick may seem frustrating. It is especially the case if we consider there is “pride” in this admission of her love for him, a “seriousness” which before Gilead “had not seemed possible [about a man]”⁵⁶⁷. Should we therefore interpret this relationship as the final step to Offred’s indoctrination, in making her believe that she needs a male presence in her life as “justifi[cation]”⁵⁶⁸? Such a conclusion may seem hasty, precisely because

⁵⁶¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 109

⁵⁶² *Ibid*, p. 282.

⁵⁶³ We will develop this in a next subpart, III – 4.2. **The Rebellious Quality of Oral Speech.**

⁵⁶⁴ “What uses are [those whispers] for me, now?” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

⁵⁶⁵ “I want to be here, with Nick” *ibid*, p. 283.

⁵⁶⁶ Joanna Russ, *To Write Like A Woman*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁵⁶⁷ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

the reader is not meant to be left with any clear answers. Indeed, Atwood may have even intended for them to be frustrated, as a punishment for expecting a tale of bravery and resistance, rather than one in which every character tries to serve their own interests, which may be what one ought to look out for in a narrative that focuses on flawed, realistic characters rather than romanticized heroes.

Yet if we were to finish on this note, we would overlook the most essential element of Offred's individual rebellion, which consists in the telling of her story. Though it is true that it is not, in itself, harmful to the regime⁵⁶⁹, there is little doubt that it is the ultimate act of resistance against a government which denies women their voice.

4. Language and Resistance

If we agree that "language is a key weapon for the reigning dystopian power structure"⁵⁷⁰, it seems to go without saying that the protagonist's reappropriation of language is absolutely central to their rebellion and to the ultimate demise of the regime. Then it becomes indispensable for us to study how Atwood handles this particular issue, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and how it relates to the great dystopias of the twentieth century.

4.1. New Modes of Communication: Reinventing Language

When a government bans free expression, it becomes difficult for those who oppose it to communicate or to verify who their allies and their enemies are. One may have in mind the passage from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when Winston becomes convinced of O'Brien disapproval of the party: "[...] there was a fraction of second when their eyes met and [...] Winston knew [...] O'Brien was thinking the same thing as himself."⁵⁷¹ What is interesting to note here is the medium of this exchange: a look, which has required no codification or indeed no effort on behalf of either Winston or O'Brien. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood's method is very different and puts the protagonist in an extremely delicate position, for the Handmaids cannot speak except for the accepted

⁵⁶⁹ Stillman and Johnson point out that Offred's story causes no damage to Gilead and that her transgression is further ambiguous because it is unclear "against whom [...] the transgression of telling is committed." "Identity, Complicity and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *art. cit.*, p. 77.

⁵⁷⁰ Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, "Dystopia and Histories", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 5-6.

⁵⁷¹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

formulas⁵⁷² distributed by the regime. Yet language remains the chief means of their communication, implying the development of codes early on in the novel. The best example is obviously Ofglen's comment: "It's a beautiful May day"⁵⁷³, referring to the SOS signal used by ships, and which Offred will learn works as a password among members of the Mayday underground. This illustrates the necessity to use hidden modes of communication within language itself. Behind the platitudes exchanged by the Handmaids, there is a deeper level, charged with meaning, through which each tries to discover who the other really is without revealing too much about themselves⁵⁷⁴. Moreover, we cannot forget language is also the main tool in the construction of fictional worlds, in storytelling, and it is obviously using language, even oral language, that Offred "reconstructs" her narrative⁵⁷⁵.

Yet some of the new modes of communication developed in the novel are unrelated to spoken language: Nick, for instance, is used to convey a signal between Offred and the Commander⁵⁷⁶. It is safer not to talk, in a world where speech is so strictly regulated, and it is logical enough that body language should gain greater importance. The scene during which Offred meets the Commander for the first time is a very interesting example: "I stop, he pauses, I can't see his face, he's looking at me, what does he want?"⁵⁷⁷ At this stage, neither Offred nor the reader knows what to expect from the Commander, both are unable to decipher him, although it is clear that "Something has been shown to me [...] Like the flag of an unknown country [...] it could mean attack, [or] parley"⁵⁷⁸. One notes the use of the lexical field of warfare, which is revealing as to Offred's relation with the Commander. Without speech, people are left to interpret each other from primary, nearly animal clues⁵⁷⁹. Everyone becomes a potential enemy, the atmosphere is one of constant mistrust. Messages of hope or ideals of resistance must be communicated either in a concealed language within

⁵⁷² For example: "Praise be" and "May the Lord open" Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 53.

⁵⁷⁴ This intricate work of interpretation and communication can be found in the passage when Offred meets the new Ofglen, (*ibid*, p. 294-297).

⁵⁷⁵ We will say more about this in the following subpart.

⁵⁷⁶ "If he's polishing the car [...] and if his hat is on askew or not on at all" then Offred knows she is to visit the Commander (Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 162).

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 59.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid*.

⁵⁷⁹ Offred mentions "the ears laid back [...] A flash of bared teeth", *ibid*.

language itself⁵⁸⁰ or read through “[t]he crimes of others”, which show the subjects of Gilead “what [they] might be capable of”⁵⁸¹.

We have already noted the restrictions on speech in Gilead and commented on the paradoxical position of Offred as a speechless narrator⁵⁸². Yet we may also add that, in such a setting, one could establish a direct link between resistance and oral speech which, in itself, is a defiance of the regime’s doctrine⁵⁸³.

4.2. The Rebellious Quality of Oral Speech

As we have established in our second part, silence was for centuries upheld as a virtue in women, as can be illustrated by the “Wise Woman”, a sixteenth-century female ideal defined as “a paragon compounded of [...] biblical morality, [who] wears a padlock on her lips to signify obedience and discretion”⁵⁸⁴. Therefore, it is sensible enough that speech itself should acquire a subversive dimension, in a feminist dystopia especially.

Indeed, we may note that even trivial talk, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is not without importance. The “gossip”⁵⁸⁵ that Offred alludes to in the second chapter of the novel is a good example, as it is apparently meaningless: only women “exchang[ing] remedies [...] complain[ing] [about] aches and pains”⁵⁸⁶. We may add that Offred does not actually take part in those “private conversations” but is merely eavesdropping, “long[ing]” for such talk which she “used to despise”⁵⁸⁷. What has changed, of course, is that in Gilead, any unsupervised conversation takes on a rebellious connotation. A return to such backward oppression as that implemented by Atwood’s regime implies a return to equally primal forms of resistance. The very fact of women coming together for unregulated exchanges reveals some degree of freedom and power. From the late sixteenth century, gossip was viewed as a wicked and typically feminine activity⁵⁸⁸, gradually associated with witchcraft⁵⁸⁹, which is revealing as to how disreputable it

⁵⁸⁰ This is the case with Ofglen.

⁵⁸¹ Offred actually refers to this as “a secret language” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

⁵⁸² Cf I – 3.4. A Speechless Narrator.

⁵⁸³ The main part of Gilead’s subjected population consists of women, and their silence, as we have seen, is linked with an established misogynistic prejudice (II – 1.2. **Misogyny and Religion**).

⁵⁸⁴ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁵⁸⁵ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 20-21.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 20.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid*.

⁵⁸⁸ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3 “Word of Mouth”, p. 27-43.

⁵⁸⁹ “[Gossips] were associated with curses and spells, with the vices of nagging and tale-bearing” *ibid*, p. 39.

was. Yet if gossip was given such a bad name, it was precisely because it was a powerful social weapon. As Marina Warner tells us, it was through gossip that medieval “women dominated the domestic webs of information and power”⁵⁹⁰. The village, shops and the street were “their arena of influence”⁵⁹¹, places which in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are associated with Offred’s talks with Ofglen. The latter are referred to as “uneasy whispers”⁵⁹², expressing secrecy and a direct link with political resistance⁵⁹³.

Talks of any kind in this novel are therefore always to be associated with rebelliousness, from the Marthas’ gossips⁵⁹⁴ to Offred’s conversations with Ofglen, Moira⁵⁹⁵, Nick and the Commander. Singing, though less present in the novel, is also connected with the subversive, as secular music has been banned by Gilead, as well as songs belonging to “outlawed sects”⁵⁹⁶. In a same page, we learn Offred “[s]ometimes [...] sing[s] to [her]self”, that “Rita will hum, while kneading or peeling” and that Serena will play a recording of herself singing from “a disc made long ago [...] as she sits there knitting”⁵⁹⁷. The women, in their respective tasks, are somehow brought together by the act of singing. Moreover, the song which Offred mentions, “Amazing Grace”, is a famous anthem of the civil rights movement and of slave resistance, as its author John Newton was a militant abolitionist⁵⁹⁸. Music in itself was a strong feature of slave revolts, for its capacity to “fuel emotions towards a common cause”⁵⁹⁹ and to make work easier, giving the people a sense of unity. In his *History of the United States*, Howard Zinn uses songs to point out the creativity of culture among slaves, stressing the audacity of their messages and their role in stimulating rebellions⁶⁰⁰. Therefore, it is not insignificant that Offred should use music as a camouflage to record her narrative: as the “Historical Notes” tell us, “each tape begins with two or three

⁵⁹⁰ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹² Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

⁵⁹³ When Ofglen gives up on Offred, “she whispers less, talks more about the weather” *ibid*, p. 283.

⁵⁹⁴ One of them is actually about a woman who killed her husband: “It was toilet cleaner she used. Worked like a charm, though you’d think he’d of tasted it.” *Ibid*, p. 21.

⁵⁹⁵ Her secret talks with Moira, hiding in the bathroom at the Red Centre. (*Ibid*, p. 83).

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 64.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁸ More to be read here: <https://www.biography.com/news/amazing-grace-story-john-newton>, date of access 01/03/2018.

⁵⁹⁹ <https://library.csun.edu/SCA/Peek-in-the-Stacks/slave-resistance>, date of access 01/03/2018.

⁶⁰⁰ He uses the examples of such songs as “O Canaan” and “Before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave [...]” Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

songs [...] then the music is broken off and the speaking voice takes over.”⁶⁰¹ It is especially interesting as the story becomes a palimpsest⁶⁰², a superposition of different voices, which we may argue works as a parallel for dystopia’s attempt to erase everything which contains a risk of dissent, from individualism to literature and history. Yet traces of what was there before remain, beneath the façade of Gilead, as Offred’s story obviously demonstrates, thus the motif of the palimpsest becomes especially interesting.

Of course, we cannot omit the importance of Offred’s tale being recorded orally. First of all, oral tales have a feminine connotation⁶⁰³: we can think of such figures as Mother Goose or Mother Stork, famously associated with fairytales, which in themselves are deeply rooted in the tradition of oral storytelling⁶⁰⁴. In fact, it may be revealing that Atwood chose the word “tale” in her title to define Offred’s narrative. It is now used to refer to any imaginary story, yet the online dictionary also defines it as “a rumor or piece of gossip, often malicious or untrue” and adds an obsolete definition, according to which “tale” referred to any talk or discourse⁶⁰⁵. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, oral speech is not only subversive, it is powerful: language is liberating⁶⁰⁶, it represents the possibility of movement for women who are prisoners⁶⁰⁷. At the Red Centre, the Handmaids use spoken language to undermine the elite: “There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power [...] It was like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion.”⁶⁰⁸

Finally, it becomes perfectly clear why oral speech should be connected with rebelliousness, when we consider its association with storytelling.

⁶⁰¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

⁶⁰² The Merriam-Webster dictionary give two definitions of the word “palimpsest”: “writing material [...] used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased” or “something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface”.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/palimpsest>, date of access 05/04/2018.

⁶⁰³ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, *op. cit.* p. 79-82.

⁶⁰⁴ Linked with “old wives’ tale [...] told by nurses to amuse and frighten children” *ibid*, p. 14.

⁶⁰⁵ Definitions 4 and 7 of the Dictionary.com: <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/tale?s=t>, date of access 01/03/2018.

⁶⁰⁶ When Offred begins seeing the Commander, she becomes addicted to talking again: “Having felt the relief of even that much speaking, I want more” Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

⁶⁰⁷ “As if the voice itself were a traveler, arriving from a distant place. Which it would be, which it is” *ibid*, p. 21.

⁶⁰⁸ *ibid*, p. 264.

4.3. Storytelling as an Act of Resistance

a) *Forbidden Books*

Before we move on to storytelling, we may linger a little on stories themselves. In almost all dystopias, from *Swastika Night* to *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we find the forbidding of books, symbolizing the regime's monopoly over knowledge and history. If we consider that "[k]nowledge of the past [...] and of oneself, are an alternative to the hegemony of the social order"⁶⁰⁹ it becomes obvious why the masses cannot be allowed to read. In a regime that imposes one official reality, a book would be a social instrument for discords, or in the words of Raffaella Baccolini, a "tool [...] to dismantle the singleness of [the regime's] discourse"⁶¹⁰. Yet systematically, in all of the dystopias we have mentioned above, all of the figures of power are extremely well-read, deepening the gap between them and the population. In *Fahrenheit 451* and *Brave New World* especially, it is clear that books are necessary to come to question the regime in the first place, to fight the mental restrictions imposed by dystopia. John the Savage rejects the New State so completely because he sees the world in Shakespearian terms⁶¹¹. As for Guy Montag, reading the Bible first confuses him before it actually broadens and alters his perception of the world.

The situation in *The Handmaid's Tale* is slightly different as, though Gilead strictly forbids women to read, the regime has not been in place long enough for the characters we encounter to be illiterate. Nevertheless, Atwood's novel follows the dystopian pattern completely, with the Commander's "bookcases [...] filled with books"⁶¹². Moreover, it introduces us to a protagonist who is very passionate about language⁶¹³, and who worked in a library before the installment of Gilead⁶¹⁴. We have not said much about Offred's visits to the Commander's office before, in how they relate to resistance in the novel, but it is clear that their most subversive dimension is their

⁶⁰⁹ Raffaella Baccolini, "Memory and Historical Reconciliation", in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹¹ The plays of Shakespeare having taught him to speak and read, he is imbued with their moral standards (Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, *op. cit.*).

⁶¹² Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁶¹³ As stated by Stillman and Johnson: "Offred delights with words [...] the richness of the English language [...] providing solace [...] in empty time" ("Identity, Complicity and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *art. cit.*, p. 75.)

⁶¹⁴ Offred's job may actually recall *Fahrenheit 451*, as it consists in "transferring books to computer disks" and putting books in the shredder (Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 182).

reintroduction of books and language in Offred's life. The magazines, the novels, the games of Scrabble, all of these activities have to do with written words and are therefore "an oasis of the forbidden"⁶¹⁵.

We have seen that the prohibition of stories (and its transgression by the protagonist) is a recurring feature of the dystopian genre, but *The Handmaid's Tale* also presents a more original relation to storytelling, through its close affiliation with fairytales.

b) Atwood and the Fairytale Dimension

Sharon Rose Wilson has claimed a "re-visioned fairy-tale sexual politics underlie[d] Atwood's aesthetics"⁶¹⁶, and it would be difficult to argue *The Handmaid's Tale* is any exception. Allusions to fairytales are ubiquitous in this novel⁶¹⁷. The Jezebel's chapters are most especially weaved in such a rhetoric, giving us disguise, a secret ball, and Offred comments that: "Everything is [...] the very same as it was, once upon a time."⁶¹⁸ The Commander's office, represented by a forbidden door, might evoke the tale of Bluebeard, especially as we know that at least one of the Handmaids who has preceded Offred has died⁶¹⁹. In fact, there is no reason why *The Handmaid's Tale* should not be read as a dark fairytale: the world of Gilead is "enchanted"⁶²⁰, under a curse to which love may be read as the solution. Nick is no prince charming⁶²¹ but he does, in a way, recall Offred to life⁶²². This reading would suggest a happy ending, resolving the ambiguity of Offred's fate. Yet we may add this dimension is somewhat paradoxical: indeed, fairytales generally lead to wonders and illusions, whereas dystopia is more strongly connected with reality, as it is to be viewed by the reader as a possible future for their society. Here one cannot forget the dual relation mentioned

⁶¹⁵ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁶¹⁶ Wilson, Sharon Rose. *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-tale Sexual Politics*. University Press of Mississippi 1993, p. 6.

⁶¹⁷ Ex "[...] some fairytale figure in a red cloak" p. 19, the Commander "looks like a shoemaker in an old fairytale book" Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 263. An even clearer allusion is made p. 266: "I must be back at the house before midnight, otherwise I'll turn into a pumpkin".

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 197.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 225.

⁶²¹ We have already alluded to Nick's ambiguity, II – 2.2. **The Men of Gilead**.

⁶²² "[...] love, it's been so long, I'm alive in my skin" Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 273.

by Mellier, between the real world and the story-world⁶²³, which applies to dystopia but not necessarily to fairy tales.

The question we might ask ourselves now is why this fairytale aesthetic is important in relation to the theme of resistance, which is what we are concerned with here. To begin with, we may point out that the fairytale is linked with women's emancipation, as it was one of the first literary genres in which women had an important role not only as characters but as storytellers⁶²⁴. In this sense, this affiliation between *The Handmaid's Tale* and fairytales becomes more than aesthetic. As Marina Warner tells us, fairytales and vernacular culture in general, was always "remarkably robust in its resistance to state propaganda"⁶²⁵. Fairytales, like Atwood's novel, are linked with anonymous storytelling, as well as with "utopian ambitions" and protest against "received ideas"⁶²⁶.

We see, therefore, that we cannot dismiss the fairytale dimension of Atwood's novel without addressing its political connotation. Especially as they share a common emphasis on the power of storytelling itself: the story, Warner does well to remind us, "becomes the weapon of the weaponless"⁶²⁷.

c) Writing and Telling

Writing is something the dystopian protagonist frequently resorts to⁶²⁸, very often in the form of diary entries. We may note that the act of writing itself, not the content of the narratives, determines the character's taking a stance against the regime. As we have seen that reading stories is forbidden to the masses, it goes without saying that writing them is not tolerated either.

Though the format of Offred's story differs from most dystopia's inasmuch as it is orally recorded, it remains very evocative of the style of diary writing. Here, we can think of the repetitive occupations that fill Offred's days, of the chapters called "Night" which give us a temporal indication, a frequent feature of journal entries. Although

⁶²³ Denis Mellier, « D'une manière l'autre de faire des mondes : science-fiction et savoirs de la fiction », *art. cit.*

⁶²⁴ As Marina Warner tells us, fairytales were frequently told by women but written by men (*From the Beast to the Blonde, op. cit.*, p. 17).

⁶²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 410.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 411.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 412. Here Warner is thinking of the fairytale tradition in Salman Rushdie's work, as well as the tales of Scheherazade.

⁶²⁸ For example: Winston (George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), Lauren (Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*), D-503 (Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*).

Offred's tale is being told rather than written, it is logical to suspect that both media have been required by its (fictional) author. We pick up a clue after Offred has seen Moira at Jezebel's: "I can't remember exactly [what she said], because I had no way of writing it down"⁶²⁹. This indicates she may have had means to write notes about all the rest of her story. Her unreliability as a narrator allows us to speculate she could have found paper, somewhere in her room, hidden the pages and carried them with her when she was rescued (if indeed, she was) by the Mayday underground. However, paper would have obviously been unavailable at Jezebel's Club.

The distinction between writing and telling stories is interesting, especially because of its inherent contradiction. Though we know Offred's tale was recorded orally, we have obviously received it in the form of a written narrative, and we learn only at the end of its original medium. Orality, as we have seen, is important in a number of ways, as it defies the misogynistic connection between women and silence and is reminiscent of fairytales, in which women were specifically storytellers, most written versions having been collected by men⁶³⁰. Besides, the power in *telling* stories in particular is emphasized in the novel. For example, we can think of Offred's statement: "Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are."⁶³¹ Here the ability of the storyteller to construct fictional worlds is associated strictly to telling. This easily connects with Anne Besson's statement that "one is willing to grant fiction with great powers, it is something like magic"⁶³². The author becomes, therefore, a kind of promethean magician while fiction is viewed as a "world-making machine"⁶³³. Moreover, to praise the creative powers of the storyteller in their ability to "bring a world to life"⁶³⁴ facilitates the "intuitive connection between possible worlds and fiction"⁶³⁵, according to Françoise Lavocat. Though not all critics agree that possible worlds in fiction are anything more than "a mere projection of the reader"⁶³⁶, we might

⁶²⁹ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 255.

⁶³⁰ For example, we can name Giambattista Basile's *Lo cunti de li cunti* (1634), Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* (1697) and the brothers Grimm's *Fairy Tales* collection (1812).

⁶³¹ Margaret Atwood, *HT, op. cit.*, p. 279. She also says she wants the reader to "hear", not read her story: "I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance" *ibid*, p. 279.

⁶³² Besson, Anne. *Mondes fictionnels, mondes numériques, mondes possibles*. Collection « Essais », Presse Universitaire de Rennes 2016, introduction, p. 5.

⁶³³ *Ibid*.

⁶³⁴ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Fiction, Cognition and Non-Verbal Media" in *Intermediality and Storytelling*, Ryan, Marie-Laure. Walter de Gruyter 2010, p. 14.

⁶³⁵ Lavocat, Françoise. *Théorie littéraire des mondes possibles*. Éditions du CNRS 2010, avant-propos (my translation).

⁶³⁶ *Ibid*.

argue the point is not really to determine whether fictional worlds may actually exist beyond the author's (and the reader's) imagination. Rather, it is more sensible to consider fiction, as Professor Murzilli does, as an "experimentation of the possible", which is to be understood not as an "experience of possible worlds" but as a "possibilization of the reader's real experience"⁶³⁷.

Therefore, this passage⁶³⁸ of *The Handmaid's Tale* is extremely important as regards the power of the writer: Offred becomes a mirror image of Atwood herself, who is the real storyteller, and who uses Offred's voice for the creation of an imaginary world. However, it is also important because it determines a reader, whose role in the world-making process is not to be neglected. As Michael Saler argues, it is by "devot[ing] sustained attention" to an "imagined world" that it "transforms" into a "virtual world, a [...] recent phenomenon"⁶³⁹. The difference is that the reader does not only imagine the story-world but, by considering it as an actual world, they become able to enter it, to inhabit it, and even to participate in it⁶⁴⁰. In fact, we might also view the task of the reader as one of reconstruction, as they must use "fictional descriptions" to "reconstruct the [story-]world"⁶⁴¹ they are immersed in.

To return to the distinction between writing and telling in Atwood's novel, we see that the creation of fictional worlds which we have just discussed is connected with telling in particular. Though we may assume that Offred has written at least some of her narrative on paper, the only thing she actually tells us about writing is the Latin phrase "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*"⁶⁴², and then she exalts the power of writing, symbolized by the pen which is "one more thing [she] would like to steal"⁶⁴³. Therefore, there is ambiguity about the format of Offred's tale, oral though presented as a written narrative. In this respect, we might even say it is deceptive, and that a parallel can be established between the unreliability of our narrator and that of her narrative.

⁶³⁷ Nancy Murzilli, « De l'usage des mondes possible en théorie de la fiction », *art. cit.*, p. 343 (my translation).

⁶³⁸ "Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are." Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

⁶³⁹ Saler, Michael. *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*. 2011. Oxford University Press 2012, p. 4-5.

⁶⁴⁰ Anne Besson, *Mondes fictionnels, mondes numériques, mondes possibles*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁶⁴¹ Lamarque, Peter. Olsen, Stein Haugom. *Truth, Fiction and Literature*. Oxford Clarendon Press 1994, p. 93.

⁶⁴² Margaret Atwood, *HT*, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 196.

One last thing that we might ask ourselves at this point regards no longer the power of the storytellers but the power of stories themselves, regardless of their form. What purpose do they actually serve, in *The Handmaid's Tale*? Stillman and Johnson have depreciated the importance of Offred's story by pointing out that "Offred's transgression of telling did not undercut Gilead", has had "no corrosive effects"⁶⁴⁴. This seems to be true as the "Historical Notes" do not indicate that Offred's narrative was even known about during the Gilead period. Yet it would not be fair to assume that, as a consequence, Offred's narrative is of no impact. It would amount to the assertion that any significant act of resistance which failed to bring down the regime was completely worthless. As we have pointed out, resistance within the dystopia is most often doomed from the start. Besides, it could be argued that the narrative's real impact is not on the characters but on the readers: it is in the extradiegetic sphere that the dystopia becomes influential. Offred's tale is not meant to have an impact in her reality, but in our own. The strategies of dystopia, as we have repeatedly emphasized, are strategies of warning⁶⁴⁵. Its importance is translated in its powerful criticism of societies that hamper truth, enslave its citizens, and deliberately turn their backs on the implementation of justice⁶⁴⁶.

To conclude on language, one might keep in mind that, aside from being the main tool of resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is also the one used by storytellers for the construction of fictional worlds. Language becomes "an instrument of mediation, of creation and of communication", as the reader must go beyond the text to reach the story-world by means of "imaginary projection"⁶⁴⁷. Moreover, we have seen that it is precisely because of its role in storytelling that language is so crucial to resistance in dystopia. Stories have a strong subversive potential, because they create alternative worlds that weaken the almightiness of a totalitarian regime, which tolerates only one truth, only one version of the world (their own).

After examining the regime of Atwood's dystopia and studying its antagonistic relationship with the human, and finally contrasting its systems of repression with modes of resistance, from asserting oneself against the regime to using language as a

⁶⁴⁴ Stillman and Johnson, "Identity, Complicity and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *art. cit.*, p. 77.

⁶⁴⁵ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 285.

⁶⁴⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan, « Mondialité, médialité », in Anne Besson, *Mondes fictionnels, mondes numériques, mondes possibles*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

means of rebellion, we can conclude that, in this respect, Atwood's novel aligns with the pioneering dystopias we have already cited. It introduces a regime which has banned anything that might lead to dissidence, from written language to mere conversations, and yet it is nonetheless met with opposition, be it organized or on an individual scale.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have endeavored to study *The Handmaid's Tale* in its relation to the dystopian genre and we have seen it does not easily fall into a clear-cut category, as scholars continue to debate what to call it⁶⁴⁸. After examining the specificities of Atwood's narrator and comparing it with the traditional dystopian protagonist, exploring how Atwood depicts gender relations and the dynamics between oppressed and oppressor, and finally considering the importance of resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we may conclude that though the novel presents numerous innovations from the traditional conventions of the genre, it has undoubtedly gained recognition as one of the finest dystopian novels. Both *Goodreads*⁶⁴⁹ and *ShortList*⁶⁵⁰ place it within the top ten on their lists of written dystopias, and it actually comes first in *The Huffington Post*⁶⁵¹. Interest in Atwood's novel has been revived both by the recent television adaptation⁶⁵² on Hulu and, oddly enough, by Donald Trump's ascension to the American presidency in January 2017. His reluctance towards abortion⁶⁵³ as well as his general misogynistic discourse on women⁶⁵⁴ has led some to look at the dystopia Atwood wrote in 1984 nearly as a prediction⁶⁵⁵. This demonstrates that, like all successful dystopias, *The Handmaid's Tale* continues to spread a chilling message to its readers which is no less relevant than it was in the 1980s.

In fact, there are several reasons to believe science fiction in general might be the ideal instrument for women writers to fight against sexist prejudice. In her collection of essays *To Write Like a Woman*, Joanna Russ is explicit when she calls science

⁶⁴⁸ Cf II – 3.3. The Nature of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

⁶⁴⁹ https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/47.Best_Dystopian_and_Post_Apocalyptic_Fiction, date of access 05/04/2018.

⁶⁵⁰ <https://www.shortlist.com/news/20-best-dystopian-novels/43969>, date of access 05/04/2018.

⁶⁵¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/lauren-sarner/the-best-dystopian-novels_b_6214804.html, date of access 05/04/2018.

⁶⁵² *The Handmaid's Tale*. Miller, Bruce. Hulu. 2 seasons. 2017-present.

⁶⁵³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/19/trump-hails-his-conscience-protections-plan-in-speech-at-march-for-life>, date of access 05/04/2018.

⁶⁵⁴ Trump has been caught saying things which not only degraded and objectified women but that could be considered as condoning sexual assault. <http://time.com/5047771/donald-trump-comments-billy-bush/>, date of access 05/04/2018.

⁶⁵⁵ For example, we can think of marches which took place in January 2017, following Trump's inauguration, where women carried posters openly referring to *HT* ("No to the Republic of Gilead", "*The Handmaid's Tale* is not an instruction manual"...) <https://www.bustle.com/p/these-margaret-atwood-signs-at-the-womens-march-will-give-you-the-chills-32074>, date of access 05/04/2018.

fiction one of the very few genres available for feminist writers, as they avoid the traditional story patterns that are found in male culture⁶⁵⁶. Though science fiction has historically been accused of being a “gendered cultural space occupied primarily by men”⁶⁵⁷, the increasing number of female authors in the genre seems to indicate the tables are turning⁶⁵⁸. As it is interested in portraying worlds estranged from our current society, science fiction enables writers to look beyond traditional gender roles and to freely explore the question of identity⁶⁵⁹.

Whereas feminist dystopias offer a warning against the dangers of patriarchy, their utopian counterparts, following Ruth Levitas’ definition of utopia, express “the desire for a better way of being”⁶⁶⁰ and, as a consequence, propose a layout for a better society. Much as dystopias reconstruct societies by amplifying their defects, utopias enable readers to imagine what the world might look like without them. Here the relation between reality and fiction is as strong as it is in the case of a dystopia, as the utopian world also aims to “problematize”⁶⁶¹ the one in which it was written and is being read. However, utopias have the specificity of imagining solutions for the aspects of society they are criticizing. Whether or not they can actually be applied to the real world as well as to the story-world, they have the merit to present a way of doing things differently (if not necessarily preferably⁶⁶²) than they are being done in society.

We can note that the 1970s were a ripe time for feminist utopias⁶⁶³, whose number of published works in the United States soared from eight percent of all utopias in 1960

⁶⁵⁶ “Culture is male. [...] There are tales for heroes, not heroines [...] we come to the one occupation of a female protagonist in literature, the one thing she can do, [...] over and over and over again. She is the protagonist of a Love Story” Joanna Russ, *To Write Like a Woman*, *op. cit.*, p. 80-84. The solution, Russ suggests, is not to resort to old story patterns or “old myths”, but to invent “new ones” in the realm of science fiction (the supernatural is also cited as a possible genre) *ibid*, p. 93.

⁶⁵⁷ Wolmark, Jenny. “Time and Identity in Feminist Science Fiction” in David Seed (ed) *A Companion to Science Fiction*. 2005. Blackwell Publishing, p. 158.

⁶⁵⁸ We can think, for instance, of Ursula Le Guin (*The Left Hand of Darkness*, 1969), Marge Piercy (*He, She and It*, 1991) and Octavia Butler (*Parable of the Sower*, 1993).

⁶⁵⁹ In the words of Jenny Wolmark: “The cultural intervention made by feminist science fiction [...] offers an account of gendered identity that [...] recognizes that identity is a matter of becoming as well as being” Jenny Wolmark, “Time and Identity in Feminist Science Fiction”, *art. cit.*, p. 161.

⁶⁶⁰ Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*. 1990. Peter Lang Ltd 2011, p. 198.

⁶⁶¹ Denis Mellier, « D’une manière l’autre de faire des mondes : science-fiction et savoirs de la fiction », *art. cit.*, paragraph 9.

⁶⁶² We have seen in our introduction that the line between dystopia and utopia is thin, and the latter may easily fall into the former.

⁶⁶³ We can think of novels such as *The Female Man* (Joanna Russ, 1975) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Ursula K. Le Guin, 1969), as both of them present a society in which gender relations and gender itself has been largely reinvented.

to thirty-two percent in 1970⁶⁶⁴. This made perfect sense in a context of “struggles for equal pay [and] reproductive rights”⁶⁶⁵, just as a dystopian revival did in the 1980s, when the rise of the Religious Right threatened women’s enduring demands for social equality. Yet this may lead us to wonder about the future of utopian literature.

If indeed dystopian fiction is “roaring back”⁶⁶⁶ and becoming increasingly popular in the Young Adult market⁶⁶⁷, should we come to the conclusion that people have run out of imagination to produce blueprints for an improved world, can we actually speak of a utopian failure? And if we agree with Professor G. R. Lucas that dystopian thinking is suffering from its commercial appeal and turning to more “juvenile” themes⁶⁶⁸, straying from its satirical and politically critical pioneers, what hope is there for the future of both utopia and dystopia? When we take a look at the success of *The Hunger Games* or the *Divergent*⁶⁶⁹ series, should we conclude that entertainment has replaced political criticism as the main purpose of the genre? In those more recent dystopias, the protagonists become closer to traditional (brave) heroes rather than to the dystopian “everyman”, and their situation is rarely as hopeless as those depicted in classical dystopias. Yet is that sufficient for us to infer that dystopia has become depoliticized?

Such a conclusion would be hasty and pessimistic. Let us first propose an answer to the idea of utopian failure, which has been debated in recent years⁶⁷⁰. Although dystopia has become rather more popular than its counterpart in fiction, the frontier between the two genres has become increasingly blurred, so it may be more difficult to tell them apart. For instance, we can think of cyberpunk fiction⁶⁷¹, whose traditional setting often recalls that of dystopias, while much of the message that it conveys is intrinsically utopian. In the words of Professor Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, cyberpunk is

⁶⁶⁴ Kessler, Carol Farley. “Distribution of Utopias by United States Women 1830-1980”. *Daring to Dream: Utopian Stories by United States Women*. 1984. Pandora Press, p. 236.

⁶⁶⁵ Pfaelzer, Jean. “The Changing of the Avant Garde: The Feminist Utopia” *Science Fiction Studies*. Vol. 15, N° 3. 1988, p. 282.

⁶⁶⁶ <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/dystopian-fiction-why-we-read/>, date of access 05/04/2018.

⁶⁶⁷ <https://the-artifice.com/popularity-of-dystopian-literature/>, date of access 05/04/2018.

⁶⁶⁸ <https://humx.org/utopian-fiction-82f5bfc0c301>, date of access 05/04/2018.

⁶⁶⁹ Roth, Veronica. *Divergent*. 2011. Katherine Tegen Books 2012.

⁶⁷⁰ Read more: <https://www.tomorrowworld.org/magazines/2006/november-december/why-has-utopia-failed>, date of access 27/04.2018.

⁶⁷¹ The Oxford dictionary defines cyberpunk as “a genre of science fiction set in a lawless subculture of an oppressive society dominated by computer technology”.
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cyberpunk>, date of access 27/04/2018.

characterized by “a desire for something better than the fallible human being”⁶⁷². Here, we can see how cyberpunk is related to posthuman discourse⁶⁷³, which brings us to reevaluate our understanding of what ‘human’ means. The posthuman is especially representative of this blurring of the frontier between utopia and dystopia as it can be “oppressive” as well as the carrier of “a more utopian valence”⁶⁷⁴, especially as regards feminism. In her well-known *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway argues that posthumanism questions the ideological distinctions between “mind and body”, “organism and machine” and, last but not least, “men and women”⁶⁷⁵. Indeed, the cyborg, being a hybrid, liminal creature, escapes the binarity that defines male or female identity⁶⁷⁶. In a chapter entitled “Posthuman Bodies and Agency”, Naomi Jacobs also underlines the work of feminists in developing the utopian potential of posthumanism⁶⁷⁷. Therefore, it seems sensible to argue future utopias will find fertile ground in posthuman bodies.

To return to our second problem, the depoliticization of dystopia, we can say that it, too, would be a precipitate conclusion, first because it would imply that teen market dystopian novels such as the two examples above (*The Hunger Games* and the *Divergent* series) are actually apolitical. In an article dealing with the popularity of dystopia among teenagers, Melissa Ames argues that such literature has an “educational” potential as it introduces adolescents to issues of “social justice”⁶⁷⁸. Though the fears they express may not be as plausible or chilling as those of Atwood’s novel, they enable teenagers to both “criticize reality” and “escap[e] it”⁶⁷⁹. Besides, the success of Young Adult dystopias should not suggest that it is all that is left of the genre. The television series *Black Mirror*⁶⁸⁰, for example, perfectly conforms to a

⁶⁷² Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan. *Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism*. 1988. Duke University Press, p. 191.

⁶⁷³ Lars Schmeink points out the connection between cyberpunk and posthumanism: “Cyberpunk [...] inserts itself into posthuman discourse by providing a science-fictional imagery for both cyborg-enhanced and genetically engineered humanity” (Schmeink, Lars. “Dystopia, Science Fiction, Posthumanism, and Liquid Modernity”, in Lars Schmeink, *Biopunk Dystopias: Genetic Engineering, Society and Science Fiction*. 2016. Liverpool University Press, p. 21).

⁶⁷⁴ Naomi Jacobs, “Posthuman Bodies and Agency” in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons, op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁶⁷⁵ Haraway, Donna. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. 1984. New York, Routledge, p. 13.

⁶⁷⁶ This is best exemplified by the quotation: “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world” *ibid*, p. 9.

⁶⁷⁷ Naomi Jacobs, “Posthuman Bodies and Agency” in Baccolini Raffaella, *Dark Horizons, op. cit.*, p. 94-95.

⁶⁷⁸ Ames, Melissa. “Engaging ‘Apolitical’ Adolescents: Analyzing the Popularity and Educational Potential of Dystopian Literature Post-9/11” *The High School Journal*. Vol. 97, N° 1. 2013, p. 3.

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 6.

⁶⁸⁰ Brooker, Charlie. *Black Mirror*. 2011-the present. Netflix.

traditional definition of dystopia, presenting bleak story-worlds in which technological progress is associated with moral regression and portraying unextraordinary protagonists who are generally played by little-known actors. In fact, the public's predilection for dystopia translates not only in the proliferation of new dystopias, but also in a revived interest in its classics⁶⁸¹, which suggests their warnings are being taken as seriously as ever. It is without mentioning that the boundary between "high" and "low" science fiction is becoming increasingly blurred, with authors such as David Mitchell⁶⁸² and Cormac McCarthy⁶⁸³ whose works defy traditional expectations. Genre-blurring as well as transmediatic⁶⁸⁴ culture offers a more modern and more diversified way for a broader audience to enter these fictional worlds which we have discussed, be they utopian or dystopian.

Of course, the renewed attention attracted by *The Handmaid's Tale* in particular should be of interest to us, and we may argue it is connected not only with its extension as a television series, but also with the recent events in the year 2017 that some have considered a "feminist turning point"⁶⁸⁵. From the prominence of strong female protagonists in films and television series to the immense popularity of the #MeToo movement, 2017 was an important year for women around the world. Unfortunately, it is also evidence that the misogyny depicted in Atwood's novel is far from being resolved, which we may imagine is not terribly surprising to its author. We have already addressed the ambiguity of the "Historical Notes" which close the novel, and which offer an ironic glimpse at a society decidedly more utopian than Gilead, yet which has failed to unroot the sexist prejudice that was at its origins. Moreover, the "Historical Notes" are all the more relevant as today's reader may identify with the period 2195, however more remote it is than the 1980s, simply because it is set *after* Gilead, after the worst of misogyny has (apparently) been dealt with. The claim that a

⁶⁸¹ A *New York Times* article deals with the renewed popularity of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Brave New World* and *The Handmaid's Tale*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/business/media/dystopian-classics-1984-animal-farm-the-handmaids-tale.html>, date of access 06/04/2018.

⁶⁸² For instance, we can think of *Cloud Atlas* (David Mitchell, 2004) which won and was nominated for several awards, and which was made into a film adaptation in 2012.

⁶⁸³ *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy, 2006) is a fine example. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2007 and was adapted to the big screen in 2009.

⁶⁸⁴ Henry Jenkins defines transmedia storytelling as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels". Jenkins, Henry. "Transmedia Storytelling 101", *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html, date of access 21/05/2018.

⁶⁸⁵ A Cherwell article gives us "[a] glance at the powerful women who have dominated [...] pop culture" in 2017: <http://cherwell.org/2017/12/29/2017-a-feminist-turning-point/>, date of access 06/04/2018.

reader might associate their society to that which follows Gilead rather than the one which precedes it should be consistent with the (rightfully debated) claim that today's Western world is post-feminist⁶⁸⁶. However, the fact that none of the periods depicted, not even Offred's past or the distant future of the "Historical Notes", is devoid of misogyny, prevents the reader from adopting the complacent attitude exhibited by Professor Pieixoto. Perhaps the message conveyed by *The Handmaid's Tale* can even be condensed in the attitude that one should have towards the past and towards social injustice. As stated by scholar Dominick Grace, such atrocities as those of Gilead will never cease to exist so long as, like Pieixoto, one continues to "contextualize, compartmentalize and historicize them, in order to avoid judging them."⁶⁸⁷

⁶⁸⁶ Post-feminism can be defined as "a process which says feminism is no longer needed [...] and [...] something young women can do without" (McRobbie, Angela. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Sage 2008, p. 8.)

⁶⁸⁷ Grace, Dominick M. "*The Handmaid's Tale*: 'Historical Notes' and Documentary Subversion." *Science Fiction Studies*. Vol. 25, N° 3. 1998, p. 490.

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