The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood: examining its utopian, dystopian, feminist and postmodernist traditions

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The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood: 
Examining its utopian, dystopian, feminist and postmodernist traditions

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS OF THE HANDMAID'S TALE 1

An Overview of Utopia and Dystopia and Their Variations: Isolation, Time, Space, and Participation

Utopian, Dystopian, Open-Ended Utopian and Feminist Utopia Traditions as Developed in The Handmaid's Tale

Personal and Literary Influences and Goals of Margaret Atwood and The Handmaid's Tale

CHAPTER II. FEMINIST ISSUES IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE 45

Examining Elements of the Feminist Tradition Including Sexuality, Motherhood, Journeys, Mirrors, the Natural World, and the Senses

CHAPTER III. LANGUAGE AND THE HANDMAID'S TALE: 103

Language and its Influences on Power, Memory, and Community

Postmodernism and The Handmaid's Tale: Narrative Structure, Self-Reflexivity, Ambiguity, and Truth Versus Fiction

A Final Look at The Handmaid's Tale: Implications of the "Historical Notes" and Looking Towards the Future

WORKS CONSULTED 149
CHAPTER I. THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS OF THE HANDMAID’S TALE

Nineteen eighty-four, it seems, was a banner year for authors of dystopian literature. The world anxiously waited to evaluate the accuracy of a vision of the “perfect society” gone awry that had been described by George Orwell in perhaps his best-known work, 1984. And at the time that we looked for examples of Orwellian prophecy come true in our own societies, Margaret Atwood was writing a text that was arguably to take over where 1984 left off. Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, itself an example of dystopian fiction focusing on physical and spiritual oppression, media manipulation, and the control of human thought as necessary governing mechanisms of society, has often been compared to Orwell’s 1984.

In many ways, Atwood’s text owes much to Orwell’s 1984, just as Orwell’s text is itself in debt to its own utopian and dystopian predecessors. Indeed, it is difficult to read Atwood’s text without flashing back to Orwell’s Oceania, the tiny island nation controlled by the Inner Party, presumably under the direction of Big Brother, a leader often talked about but never seen. However, Atwood is not simply rehashing Orwell’s ideas. Elements of a long-standing dystopian tradition are clearly present in her work, but these should not blind readers and critics to other equally pervasive literary traditions existing in her text.
The main goal of this research is to examine some of the literary traditions expressed in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, particularly the four main genres that are developed in Atwood’s novel: utopian, dystopian, open-ended utopian and feminist utopian literatures. Further, by examining Atwood’s use of postmodernist narrative strategies and feminist imagery, we can get a more complete and detailed picture of the various novelistic traditions that are expressed in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. As any student of literature knows, these traditions are not mutually exclusive. A text naturally borrows from its ancestors and builds from there; in this regard, Atwood’s work is no different.

In order to fully understand what Atwood is doing in her text, it is essential to know some of the history of the utopian and dystopian traditions that the author has used. Thus, in Chapter I, I will present background information on utopian and dystopian literature and examine these traditions as they are developed in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Further, I will show how Atwood’s Canadian heritage, her Puritan ancestry, and three key literary works have been influential on *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Chapter II will analyze specific textual, symbolic, and narrative features of *The Handmaid’s Tale* by focusing on Atwood’s concern for feminist issues as expressed through her use of feminist imagery. In Chapter III, I will discuss some of the issues involving the uses of language and the Postmodern techniques developed by Atwood. Finally, I will examine the “Historical Notes” of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and discuss their implications for the text itself and for the future.
It is difficult to analyze any text in a vacuum, and for this reason, it is helpful to have a text with which to compare *The Handmaid's Tale*. Given that first-time readers and critics alike compare Atwood's text to the dystopian text *1984*, it seems only fitting that George Orwell's work lends itself well to an analysis of Atwood's novel. But because Atwood's text covers ground not considered by Orwell in *1984*, a point-by-point comparison of the two texts will not emerge from this research.

An Overview of Utopia, Dystopia, and Their Variations: Isolation, Time, Space, and Participation

The term "Utopia" that Sir Thomas More first used to describe his imaginary island, a term that quickly spread to encompass an entire genre of literature, is a problematic term indeed. The word is, first of all, unclear in definition, for it stems from the two Greek words eu-topos, meaning "the good place," and ou-topos, meaning "no place." More important, though, are the numerous philosophical and social implications of the duality expressed in this term, for how can a utopia be a good place and a nonexistent place at the same time? Does the choice of this particular term mean that any society that strives for perfection is doomed inevitably to fail, to cease to exist, and thus, ironically, to make More's term accurate after all?

The utopian tradition is a long one because these questions have challenged and intrigued authors for hundreds of years. Beginning with More's island, the term was used to describe good places such as
Tommaso Campanella’s City of the Sun [1602], Cabet’s Icaria [1907], W. D. Howells’ Alturia [1894], but also “ambiguous/no places like Samuel Butler’s Erewhon [1872] and the underground world of Bulwar-Lytton’s The Coming Race” (Beauchamp 1). Because authors felt that the utopian genre created societies that were unrealistic and limiting, they eventually moved away from prototypical utopias and created very different kinds of societies, dystopias, or “bad/no places such as those depicted in Wells’ When the Sleeper Wakes [1899], Jack London’s The Iron Heel [1907], and Victor Rousseau’s The Messiah of the Cylinder” (Beauchamp 1).

Authors seek to make their works distinct from other works similar in nature, so these utopian texts are hardly interchangeable. They do, however, share some interesting characteristics. One such similarity involves the locations of these perfect societies. In prototypical utopian fiction, these societies are isolated, distanced from the “real world” in some significant way. Thomas More and Frances Bacon selected islands on which to build their societies. The City of the Sun created by Campanella was impenetrable due to its seven-mile walls and seven circuits. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland, the all-woman society exists high above a “savage” jungle, and its only physical connection to the world was closed off two thousand years earlier when a volcano flow filled the one passage out of Herland. According to Efraim Sopher, “Both the pastoral arcadia and the ‘garden city’ had used the spatial metaphor of enclosure as a secure boundary of order and happiness” (379). With the gaining popularity and
influence of science fiction, some authors isolated their communities in seemingly "modern ways," placing their utopian societies into future time dimensions or on distant planets. Thus, these societies were "frozen" and separated from a chaotic and irrational reality by physical barriers such as walls and water, or by the metaphysical barriers of space and time.

The theme of isolation of utopian fiction is just one of many similarities existing in the genre. Another way that these societies are similar involves the degree to which the societies are capable of growth or change. Logically, since a utopia is a perfect society, and since perfection cannot be improved upon, a utopia has evolved to its fullest potential; it is simply incapable of bettering itself. Thus, just as the society is suspended in space and time, it is also suspended in its own history and development. The society has come to a standstill, possessing a "millanarian quality which makes even more marked its remoteness from the contemporary reality to which it is designed to offer an alternative" (Ferns 460). As Naomi Jacobs cautions us, however, a utopia should not be oversimplified as being merely a perfect society. Rather, utopias are characterized by a lack of definite movement, by homeostasis.

It is an oversimplification to describe the classical utopias as visions of perfection; but their geometric precision, their attempts to contain all within a single structure, and their abilities to absorb and convert outsiders who
venture within the charmed circle, resemble to a disturbing degree the mechanized, sanitized efficiency which characterizes our own society's most pervasive images of perfection. (34)

How the society got to its final stage of development, interestingly, is often not discussed. We as readers have discovered the society only after it has been well established and is running smoothly. Characters may make vague references to the past, but to the author, the series of changes, the processes involved in the creation of this utopia are not considered as important as chronicling the actual present-day functioning of the society. Authors work to provide clear descriptions of the successes of their complete worlds rather than deal with any of the negative ramifications that the creations may have caused. The replacement of one society with another would surely involve some degree of conflict. Even if every member of the utopian society was agreeable to change and embraced it with open arms, the inhabitants would still require time and patience to become fully assimilated to so radically improved a world. This internal conflict, however, seems to be ignored. In fact, individual members of the utopian society are surprisingly complacent. Perfection for them has been reached, so why should they bother struggling for anything else?

This utopian world has, according to some critics, made for inhabitants who are often without life and are lacking in substance and motivation, an entire world of "Stepford" wives, husbands, and children. Rather than embodying true emotion and authentic feeling,
classically utopian characters are often given life only to be representatives of some ideal utopian feature. For example, the single female in Bellamy's *Looking Backward* seems to exist, according to Chris Ferns, only to take the narrator shopping and thus open the narrator's eyes to the "wonders of utopian commerce" (460).

Yet another reason that characters in utopian works are poorly developed is because of the conflict between the political and aesthetic goals of the author. Authors have particular visions of society that they wish to express, and their only tools are their words. A dilemma then occurs because oftentimes plot developments serve only as political illustrations; characters function merely as mouthpieces for a particular authorial agenda. Many critics argue that it is the intersection of the aesthetic and the political that should be the author's and critic's primary concern, but too often, in seeking to persuade politically and inspire artistically, the text fails to achieve even one of these.

One way that utopian authors have attempted to achieve their aesthetic and political goals is to create narrative structures suitable for this dual purpose. One such strategy deals with how we, as readers, actually learn of what goes on in the utopian society. We are told the "plot" of the utopian work but it is infused with political commentary at the same time. A common strategy used by these kinds of texts is the "traveller's tale," through which readers learn that an unfamiliar "alien" has dropped in on the society, either through time travel or by crossing physical barriers. In Campanella's *The City of the Sun*, the
narrator Genoese, one of Columbus’ sailors, has shipwrecked on an island. He says, “I soon came upon a large company of armed men and women, and many of them understood my language. They led me to the City of the Sun” (27). Further, we learn of his experiences in the society, what he has seen, heard, and perhaps most importantly, been told about the wonders of the society by a native. For example, Campanella employs a “question-answer” strategy in which the Hospitaler, a knight, questions Genoese about various aspects of the utopian city and is answered by Genoese based on the sailor’s experiences and interpretations of those experiences. There are, then, two “traveler’s tales” in this book. Genoese travels through the City of the Sun, and the Hospitaler then travels through Genoese’s tale.

It is important to note that whatever answers the Hospitaler has received have been filtered through at least three sets of perceptions. First of all, the utopian vision is created by the author, Campanella. Secondly, a person who has actually made contact with the society, such as Genoese, interprets the nature of the world for outsiders. And finally, the narrator functions as our tour guide, moving us through the encounter, controlling what we see and hear, just as the visitor’s perceptions are being shaped by the native, just as the native is being controlled by the author. We readers are dependent upon Genoese’s accuracy of vision when he shares his observations and insights. It is easy to see, with all of these “contributors,” that the ultimate message, the “truth” of the society could be distorted at a number of junctures.
The tendency of utopian writing to avoid historical development, internal conflict, movement in time and space and fully developed characterizations has not gone unnoticed by critics and authors. Thus, there has been a shift in utopian writing over time, this shift taking two primary directions: authors have either rejected the utopian concept completely or they have attempted to modify the utopian idea. Rather than glorify or work with classic utopian texts, some authors have created dystopias or anti-utopias, using satire to ridicule and parody the utopian tradition. Like the utopian tradition, the dystopian tradition is also long and varied, including Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), Emile Souvestre’s *Le monde tel qu’il sera* (1846), Fernand Giraudieu’s *La cité nouvelle* (1868), Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872), Edgar Welch’s *The Monster Municipality* (1882), Walter Besant’s *The Revolt of Man* (1882), Henry Coverdale’s *The Fall of the Great Republic* (1885), Ignatius Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column* (1890), William Harben’s *The Land of the Changing Sun* (1894), H. G. Wells’ “A Story of the Days to Come” and *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), David Parry’s *The Scarlet Empire* (1906), William Le Queux’s *The Unknown Tomorrow* (1910), Evgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1920), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), John Kendall’s *Unborn Tomorrow* (1933), Ayn Rand’s *Anthem* (1938), and of course, George Orwell’s *1984*, written in 1948 (Khoury 137-138).

While satire and parody are involved here, the intentions of these authors were deadly serious, transforming the utopian dream into a nightmare, focusing on the sacrifices and dangers to be found in
the pursuit of perfection. Like the utopian tradition, the dystopian tradition also shares important similarities. One of the central fears or concerns of dystopian fiction deals with the invasion of technology and mechanical progress. Whereas utopian fiction glorified technology as the means to achieve, to "arrive at" the perfect state of development, dystopian writers lamented the dominant role that has been taken by technology in society.

Authors feared that the invasion of technology would lead to a replacement of human values and human nature. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, for example, there are massive "Fertilizing Rooms" in which the Bokanovsky's Process, or an elaborately controlled process of artificial insemination, has distorted the very-human processes of procreation and birth. "A bokanovskified egg will bud, will proliferate, will divide. From eight to ninety-six buds, and every bud will grow into a perfectly formed embryo, and every embryo into a full-sized adult. Making ninety-six human beings grow where only one grew before. Progress" (2). In surveying the dystopic and science fiction traditions, critic Keith Hull questions the effects of the incredible achievements of science and technology on humanity in general.

Where, along the genetic and evolutionary continua, does humanity begin? This is not just a scientific question. Artificial intelligence research, genetic engineering, life-prolonging machines, the abortion controversy, and the self-styled scientific creationism movement all
present immediate practical challenges to our
conception of what a human being is. (66)

Not only was technology feared because of what it already was
capable of doing in society, it was feared for what it had the potential
of achieving. Although "telescreens" didn't actually exist in Orwell's
own 1948, the technology he observed suggested that a world of total
surveillance and total control was at least technically possible. Like
Zamyatin and Huxley, Orwell saw the threat of "dehumanization
lurking in unrestrained technological development and [imagined]
what the world would be like where machine had triumphed over
man" (Beauchamp 4). Ultimately, authors feared the "total control of
society by a power elite using technology to impose a frightening
artificial order" (Khour 139).

Another important consideration of dystopian fiction is that it
sought not to predict future events, but to voice concerns about events,
technological and otherwise, existing in the authors' own lifetimes.
Creating dystopian texts, for authors such as George Orwell and
Jonathan Swift, was "the climactic achievement in a lifetime of political
writing, and the form chosen may be seen as one way of putting into
literary perspective the urgent concerns of each with the conditions of
his own time" (Mezciems 190). Most dystopian works are not meant to
be purely realistic novels, nor are they meant to be accurate
predictions of some unseen future. To judge 1984 and other dystopian
texts in terms of their "correct guesses" in predicting the future is to
miss the point of the works themselves. Critic W. Russel Gray, writing
in the year 1984 says that Orwell’s novel “was not intended as a self-fulfilling prophecy but its opposite. By extrapolating his fears into both a literary and popular success, Orwell created an instant myth. . . . By doing so he helped us shape a Big Brotherless future--at least as of the real 1984.” Even as early as 1949, one year after publication of 1984, critic Philip Rahv warned us that “to read this novel simply as a flat prediction of what is to come is to misread it” (313).

Interestingly, dystopian authors are often criticized for the same reason as their utopian counterparts, for creating characters that are two-dimensional, lifeless, and unrealistic. In response to criticisms against dystopian authors for having “flat” characterizations in their works, Irving Howe writes, “These books try to present a world in which individuality has become obsolete and personality a sign of subversion. The major figures of such books are necessarily grotesques” (308). Criticisms of dystopian characterization also involve a failure to see that in some texts, extensive psychological development and dramatic tension can be detrimental to the goals of a text which focuses on the reactions of humans who are trapped, both spiritually and physically, by the worlds around them. An illustrative example of this occurs in 1984 in which the citizens of Oceania fall into two central camps: those who support the wishes of the Party and those who rebel but are instantly (or almost instantly) thwarted in their attempts. The oppressive laws and rules of Oceania are designed to prohibit any dialogue about the structure of the society. Further, each person is plugged into a specific and inescapable slot, be it as a member of the
Inner Party, Outer Party, or Proletariat Party. The structure of the society itself precludes easy movement from one class to another or the open exchange of ideas and experiences that would help people to grow and become more lifelike. As Howe tells us:

In *1984* Orwell is trying to present a world in which individuality has become obsolete and personality a crime . . . Orwell has imagined a world in which the self, whatever subterranean existence it manages to eke out, is no longer a significant value, not even a value to be violated. (322)

This tendency to create two-dimensional characters is also due to the fact that some dystopian authors wish to focus on the despair of their societies; they don’t want to offer their readers hope. Hope would be possible if we had a string of strong and confident heroes on which to pin our dreams. But in *1984*, for example, Winston Smith is anything but heroic. His sickly and pale physical condition, right down to the ulcerated veins on his ankle, repels us. Further, his personal strength and charisma are also lacking, particularly when we witness how he is utterly defeated by O’Brien at the conclusion of the text. The last thing readers want to know is that Winston Smith “loved Big Brother” (245). Amin Malak writes, “The nightmarish atmosphere of dystopias seems to preclude advancing positive, assertive characters that might provide the reader with consoling hope” (10-11).
Not all authors have responded in such a negative manner to the shortcomings of the utopian text. Rather, some authors have chosen to work with the form rather than completely abandon the utopian ideal. One such modified version has been called the “open-ended utopia,” and it is characterized by three conditions. First, this utopian society is still developing and striving for perfection rather than being a static society that has already achieved it. In Ata, the society in Dorothy Bryant’s *The Kin of Ata are Waiting for You*, the society hopes that all members of the human race will one day return to Ata so that the society can, as a whole, return to the sun from which it originated. Thus, the society of Ata has not evolved completely but depends upon a reunification of humanity to reach its final state of development. As Bülent Somay writes, open-ended utopian texts “portray a utopian locus as a mere phase in the infinite unfolding of the utopian horizon, thereby abolishing the limits imposed on it by classical utopian fiction” (26). In another example, the women of Gilman’s *Herland* are never satisfied with their society as it is. Rather, they see it as honoring their ancestors to continue educating themselves, to continue changing and improving their ways of life. As Ellador tells Van, our narrator, each generation produces children who will become critics because they can see the world in new and better ways. Change is not feared in this society; it is expected and praised. Such utopias stress that life is contingent upon all human choice and human action. Because human behavior is often erratic, the future is neither predictable nor controllable. “Since the future is shaped in the present,
and not just by the decisions of the rulers, but by every single human action--by every step taken by every one of us, however insignificant it may seem--each person is responsible for the future" (Somay 31). Each citizen, then, is responsible for remembering the past, improving the present, and insuring the future for the next generations.

A second characteristic of the open-ended utopia follows from the first. Because these societies are still changing, conflicts and struggles are very real concerns. First, these societies are not perfect. Minor squabbles still occur; people are, after all, still human. The conflict that would inevitably result from being human is indeed a feature, and arguably one of the more interesting features, of these newer works. In Dorothy Bryant’s Ata, for example, any behavior that is negative because it takes its citizens away from their central goal of dreaming is called “donagdeo.” Citizens work individually and collectively to avoid donagdeo, but they still occasionally stray from dreaming strong dreams. Also, there may be conflicts between the actual citizens of the society. In The Wanderground, for example, the hill women cannot decide if they should meet with the “Gentles,” men from the City, since they have never formally met with them before. In addition, minor bickering occurs between the women such as when Ono becomes upset with Egathese’s apparent callousness regarding the injuries of the dog Cassandra. “Ono was suddenly flushed with anger. Without even knowing she did it, she told Egathese that she was a crotchety old woman, a bitch--apologies to Cassandra--and that it was a wonder anyone had ever loved her” (35). In Joanna Russ’ short
story, “When it Changed,” Janet, the narrator, tells of women participating in duels and carrying rifles. In this society, not all of the conflict and disagreement have been eliminated. And in Herland, the most idyllic society, women have virtually eliminated conflict, but a few “cracks” are visible. For example, Ellador explains that some women are persuaded to let others care for their children since they are not as skilled at motherhood as some of the other women. While this doesn’t indicate open hostility or conflict, it does show that there are still human flaws existing in the women of Herland. Also, one wonders what will become of Ellador, the one woman who will return to America, upon her induction into our society. Will she remain true to her own culture, or will she, unfortunately, adopt aspects of ours?

Thus, conflicts can occur on personal, interpersonal, and societal levels.

A third condition of the open-ended utopia is that the society is not completely isolated from the world that exists around it. The utopian world lives perilously close to the real world that presents tremendous danger. Such contemporary works as Marge Piercy’s feminist utopia Woman on the Edge of Time, Joanna Russ’s “When It changed,” and Sally Miller Gearhart’s The Wanderground are examples of contemporary utopias where the negative aspects of the “real world” have been replaced, or at the very least, must live in combination with utopian ideals. In Woman on the Edge of Time, which is set in a very real New York City, “the forces of sexism and technocracy have been marginalized to the arctic regions and outer space” (Ferns 453). On Russ’s Whileaway, the women live on a planet that is separate from
earth, but at the conclusion of the short story, we learn that men from earth want to re-colonize the planet.

Significant differences do occur in how the citizens of the utopian communities respond to such "invasions." Some are openly fearful, such as the women of Whileaway. As Janet tells us, upon hearing that men will return to Whileaway, "All good things must come to an end. Take my life but don't take away the meaning of my life" (239). Others, however, possess the guarded hope that the utopian ways of life will be embraced by outsiders resulting in a newer and stronger sense of community. In *The wanderground*, the hill women live in women-centered communities known as the Western and Eastern Ensconcements. In these areas, the women have achieved relative peace and harmony through their respect for nature and their telepathic abilities. They are, however, always vigilant that men from the bordering "City" (a place that sounds very similar to Atwood’s Gilead) will invade their world. At the conclusion of the novel, in which some men of the "City" have gained telepathic powers themselves and have vowed to work with the hill women to protect what these women have worked for, I felt that the two worlds, if not unified, were at least a bit less distant. Further, the women vow, "To work as if the earth, the mother, can be saved. To work as if our healing care were not too late. Work to stay the slayer’s hand, helping him to change" (Gearhart 195). These lines reveal a desire to protect their way of life and the earth, but they also show that the women are
willing to make the necessary sacrifices to reunite humanity and teach "the slayers" respect and equality.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* is also a society that is invaded by men who immediately wish to move in and help these poor, unfortunate, isolated women. Even though these women attempt to teach Terry, Jeff, and Van their language, histories, and traditions, the men still have difficulty accepting the fact that males did not have an active hand in the creation and maintenance of this culture. When the men try to dominate these women, they soon learn that they are well matched by strong and confident "females" who will defend their way of life. The women soon, however, become eager to learn of the world that is described by the visiting men, even to possibly join with that world. In doing so, it seems that these women are only inviting the corruption and oppression that are clearly represented by Terry's chauvinistic actions and attitudes. And in Ata, the citizens long for a reconnection with humanity for it is the only way that the society can be complete and its citizens become one with the sun. The citizens of Whileaway, the Wanderground, Herland, and Ata did not band together and segregate themselves because they wanted to. Rather, they did what they had to do in order to survive either nature or oppressive treatment. It seems that these societies would like to share what they have learned with the patriarchal cultures existing nearby if only they men would listen. As Chris Fern writes:

> Where early utopias were conceived as isolated bastions of sanity in the midst of a world of
chaos and unreason, their more recent counterparts have become all-embracing, the Wellsian world state being a case in point. . . .
The overall trend appears to be towards utopian fictions where the ideal society, instead of cutting itself off from the real world, seeks rather to replace it. (453)

While these open-ended utopias are not solely in the domain of feminists, it can’t be denied that feminist writers of the 1970’s and 1980’s certainly revitalized a tradition that seemed to have given way to dystopian writing. There is, then, a great deal of overlap between the open-ended utopia and the feminist utopian text. The feminist utopian text has as its central focus issues concerning gender. These texts study how gender is expressed through humanity’s relationship to the environment and through power relationships that exist in communities of people. Some of the texts that have been discussed could be considered hybrids because they are concerned with issues common to both genres. For example, the citizens of The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You take great care not to abuse their environment. Theirs is an agrarian society based on sustenance living. Citizens use their dreams to tell them where plants should go, they don’t eat animals, and they fast during the winters. In Herland forests and fields have been given loving care. As Jeff, Terry, and Van notice, not a dead leaf or dying vine can be seen in the entire country. The women of Herland also live only on the plants around them and they
too refuse to kill animals for food (although they will allow cats to kill field mice). The concern for the environment is even more pronounced in *The Wanderground* in which the hill women actually communicate directly with nature, with animals, trees, water, wind. Water is asked for its permission to be boiled; trees are thanked for their shade. Just as in *Herland*, cats hold a special position in the society. Herland's cats are the only domesticated animals that exist, while in *The Wanderground*, cats are actually warehouses for the memories of the culture and in Marge Piercy's *Mattapoisett*, cats and humans have developed sign language with which to communicate. In fact, the attitude towards the environment may best summed up by Luciente, when she tells Connie in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, "We plan cooperatively. We can afford to waste... nothing. You might say our--you'd say religion?--ideas make us see ourselves as partners with water, air, birds, fish, trees" (125). Thus, these texts seem to combine elements from the open-ended and feminist utopian traditions.

A second focus of the feminist utopian text deals with power relationships between races, classes, ages, and genders. Works like *The Kin of Ata* and *The Wanderground* demonstrate a concern for equality between human beings and even animals and plants. In *The Kin of Ata*, there is no single power structure; no one person is in charge. The society is filled with members from different races, genders, and ages, but most honored is the "strong dreamer," and this person could be any one. In fact, the most honored person of the novel seems to be Augustine, a black woman who was orphaned as a child. It is only
when Augustine is sent back to the “real world” that her status as a black woman works against her. She is forced to work a string of menial jobs and is eventually shot while attending a civil rights rally. Her world gives her life; our world kills her.

Even more dramatic are the societies created by Gearhart, Russ and Gilman in which women have completely separated themselves from worlds created by men. In The Wanderground, women were forced to escape to the hills to save themselves from being hunted, raped, forced into prostitution or institutionalized. Herland and Whileaway were societies that originally had men, but because of natural disasters, wars, or diseases, the men died and only the women lived. Survival and even prosperity came because these women created societies in which they are all sisters; the responsibility for work and for making decisions was equally distributed. Just as in Ata, the utopian worlds of the Wanderground, Herland, and Whileaway are contrasted with the “real” world because of invasions by men. The Wanderground and Whileaway are probably the most radically different worlds that have been described thus far in that these women created their worlds out of virtually nothing, and they are prepared to fight to defend them. Lyman Tower Sargent discusses that these “anarchist eutopias,” in which women are the symbols of the new society, have become more and more common.

According to the recent eutopias, a man as the symbol of anarchism is wrong. Men are given to authority and hierarchy as well as patriarchy.
Women, being given to freedom and equality, are most likely to be anarchists; therefore, a woman should be the symbol of anarchism. (3)

These works focus on creating a new order based not on existing standards of conduct but upon new power structures. Their new worlds, while not ideal, are certainly improvements upon the present worlds from which they have separated. What is most under attack is the imbalance of power between classes, ages, races, and genders. Most needed for improvement is a reassessment of authority and power in our culture.

Anarchism is a political philosophy contending that no one (individual or group) should hold coercive authority. . . . This does not mean that society will be a totally unorganized group of isolated individuals, anarchists contend, without power and authority. Society cannot only exist; it can thrive. . . . Order must not be coercive; it must be (1) voluntary, (2) functional, (3) temporary, and (4) small. (Sargent 6-7)

Anarchy is not the only way by which utopias with democratic and cooperative aims can exist. For example, in The Kin of Ata are Waiting for You, this society consists of both men and women who wait in hope for members of “the great world” to listen to their dreams and voluntarily return to Ata, the land of their origins. When this is done, as it has been by the narrator of the story, there is a reason for great
celebration. The few times when Ata accidentally encounters those of the real world who may have less-than-noble intentions, such as when a ship sails near the island or an airplane flies overhead, the citizens of Ata use their psychic powers to cause the island to disappear. They aren't violent, nor do they feel threatened by the real world. Rather, they wish only for others to peacefully join them, to establish a place where "egalitarian, consensual, and cooperative relationships flourish and where work is done in an almost altruistic fashion" (Nielsen 152).

And in Herland, the women seem eager to rejoin the two male and female worlds because they feel the relationships can be symbiotic. Great celebration is called for when Celis becomes pregnant with Jeff's child, ushering in a new male-female era.

Utopian, Dystopian, Open-Ended Utopian and Feminist Utopia Traditions as Developed in The Handmaid's Tale

It can be seen that utopian and dystopian traditions and their many variations, including the open-ended utopia and the feminist utopia, existed and evolved long before Margaret Atwood wrote The Handmaid's Tale. This novel, in fact, contains elements from all four traditions. Interestingly, readers who encounter the text generally notice the dystopian features of the text first, as these seem to be the most dramatic and memorable parts of the book. The narrator, Offred, lives in a hopelessly oppressive regime that has been established as the Republic of Gilead and then feels hope in the discovery that an underground network of resistance does in fact exist. Further, she
forms an illicit and illegal love affair with a member of that resistance, a chauffeur named Nick, and this union gives her hope that a positive future may be possible. As other texts have done, The Handmaid’s Tale succeeds in combining elements from both utopian and dystopian traditions.

Like prototypical utopias, The Republic of Gilead, the “perfect society” of The Handmaid’s Tale, is indeed physically isolated. Gilead is set in present-day Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the late 1990’s. It is part of the United States, and thus it is still surrounded by Canada, Mexico, and Cuba, but these nations do not share in Gilead’s patriarchal and religiously conservative philosophies. Canada, in fact, has helped establish the Gilead version of the Underground Railroad called the “Underground Femaleroad,” which is used by the handmaids to escape Gilead. Mexico’s role is a bit less clear, but we do learn from Offred that “ever since Central America was lost to the Libertheos, oranges have been hard to get,” (34) and occasionally, we are told that those “damn Cubans” are broadcasting messages over Radio Free America (271-272). We also learn that some former handmaids escaped to England, where various “Save the Women” societies existed (385). Thus like Oceania, its 1984 counterpart, the community of Gilead is in the middle of ideological conflict on both national and global levels.

We do get a detailed taste of the oppressive life in Gilead throughout the novel. For example, during a shopping trip taken by Offred, the handmaid who narrates the novel, she tells us:
We reach the first barrier, which is like the barriers blocking off roadworks, or dug-up sewers: a wooden crisscross painted in yellow and black stripes, a red hexagon which means Stop. Near the gateway there are some lanterns, not lit because it isn’t night. Above us, I know, there are floodlights, attached to the telephone poles, for use in emergencies, and there are men with machine guns in the pillboxes on either side of the road. I don’t see the floodlights and the pillboxes, because of the wings around my face.

(26-27)

Many different kinds of barriers are present in this brief passage. Physical barriers such as soldiers and barricades prevent free movement from place to place. Linguistic barriers are also abundant because written words do not exist in this world, having been replaced by less “dangerous” images. Finally, Offred’s restrictive clothing, her “wings,” forms a barrier, limiting her vision and perception and thus controlling her behavior.

The Republic of Gilead is also trapped in time, or more accurately, working to enclose itself in a specific era of the past. The nation bases its laws and very existence upon Judeo-Christian Scripture, particularly the Old Testament, which is seen by the leaders of Gilead as the source for all laws and social customs. Examples of this influence abound in the text. Many of the names and titles for people and places are drawn
from the Bible. Guards are called Angels; soldiers are called Angels of the Apocalypse and Angels of Light; the training center where handmaids are indoctrinated are called Rachel and Leah Centers; cars named Chariots, Whirlwinds, and Behemoths drive the streets, and stores are called Milk and Honey, All Flesh, Lilies of the Field, Daily Bread, Loaves and Fishes.

The situation in which Offred finds herself is, in fact, founded on Biblical precedent. The first words we read of the novel, other than the title and the dedications, consist of an epigram in which we are told the Biblical story of Rachel, who, unable to conceive her own children, said to her husband Jacob, "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (Genesis 30: 1-3). Religious ideology clearly pervades this text although Atwood herself, in an interview with Tom Vitale, contends that "this book is not about the evils of religion. . . . It is not a comment about religion of that kind. It is a speculation of how, if you wish to take over power in the United States, you would go about it" (A Moveable Feast). Atwood does not seem to condemn religion itself, even conservative religious practices. What she objects to are groups who use their own dogma to create laws for the rest of society, who attempt to regulate private behaviors, such as procreative rights, under the guise of religious belief and establishing "moral" behavior.

Thus, in creating a society that looks to its Biblical past for direction, Atwood adds a unique twist to the utopian characteristic of restricted development or growth. Rather than trying to achieve a
perfect state by progressing forward in time and technological ability, Gilead is working in the opposite direction, moving towards a time when technology was of limited development. In fact, it is technical progress that has in part led to the theocratic laws of Gilead. Because technology and industry have so damaged the United States that three in four women are sterile, religious leaders have stepped in and taken control of society. Offred remembers, "The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells" (143).

Seeing the damage that technology, pollution, and advanced birth control measures (such as contraceptive devices and abortive measures) has caused, this society longs for a supposed past "golden age" when Christian ideology ruled the land, a time when faith took precedence over the machine. As Margaret Atwood states in A Moveable Feast, there has never been a "golden age" for everyone. In all societies there is dissension. In Gilead, there are those who do not support the church-state, nor do they agree with its laws. The Judeo-Christian Bible has been used to establish the sole code of conduct in Gilead. Thus, isolation has turned into imprisonment, harmony achieved only through physical threat, and perfected homeostasis has turned into stagnation for the citizens of Gilead.

How we, as well as Offred, learn about Gileadean society and its rules is another interesting hybrid of utopian and dystopian traditions. Offred is an actual member of her society. Granted, her rights and
accessibility are quite limited in this theocracy, just as Winston Smith was limited in his ability to freely speak and move about in Oceania. Just the same, however, these two characters were born in their respective communities. They are not alien visitors who have travelled through time and space or across physical borders. If anything, these two wish to exit, not enter, their societies.

 Nonetheless, these characters do not fully understand the goals and histories of their communities. According to T. A. Shippey, it is difficult for our heroes or rebels, because of their oppressed states, to gain the complete knowledge they search for, and so they must be given some help. Thus, in both 1984 and The Handmaid’s Tale, explanations and clarifications are provided, both for Winston and Offred and for readers as well. One solution to this problem of gaining answers is for the author to “provide a ‘captain’s log’-- a document of some kind which explains what has happened and is somehow (often with very little plausibility) transferred to the hero’s possession” (Shippey 179). A second solution is that information is told to the character by a leader of the society.

 In 1984, Winston Smith learns the goals and history of Oceania and the Inner Party in these two key ways. First, O’Brien deliberately gives Winston Smith The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism by Emmanuel Goldstein (which critics contend is in reference to Trotsky). It is in this book that Winston learns of the reasons for the total domination of Oceania’s citizenry, the continual global wars between the three “super powers,” and the lack of material
necessities. He does not get to finish the text, however, and the only question that he isn’t able to answer is “why?”

The second way that Smith learns about his society is through direct contact. In his confrontation with O’Brien, O’Brien attempts to answer Smith’s remaining question of “why?”

And now let’s get back to the question of ‘how’ and ‘why.’ You understand well enough how the Party maintains itself in power. Now tell me why we cling to power. What is our motive? Why should we want power? . . . Now I will tell you the answer to my question. It is this. The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. . . . We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means, it is an end. . . . The object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me? (216-217)

Offred too learns the goals and philosophies of her society in these ways. A brief but meaningful document is presented to her. While examining her room at the Commander’s house, the home to which she has been assigned for the purpose of being a surrogate mother, she finds etched on the floor the words “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” which means, “Don’t let the bastards grind you down” (242). These words aren’t as detailed as Goldstein’s political treatise,
but they hold just as much information for Offred, for they allow her to experience a glimpse of the past, a past in which another Offred lived in this house. This message allows Offred to “connect” with the previous Offred, a woman we learn has committed suicide. Offred learns that some sort of resistance effort, even if only found in the heart and etched words of a single woman, has existed, and these words give Offred a framework from which to operate; she now knows that resistance is possible because at least two philosophies have existed in Gilead. Just as in Oceania, there is loyalty to the leaders of Gilead and open rebellion against the established authorities as well.

Most of Offred’s understanding of her new society comes from living humans, however. One such character is Aunt Lydia, who is the spokesperson for a group of menopausal women called “Aunts” who have been put in charge of “teaching” the handmaids about the mistakes women made in the past:

Some women believed there would be no future, they thought the world would explode. That was the excuse they used, says Aunt Lydia. They said there was no sense in breeding. Aunt Lydia’s nostrils narrow: such wickedness. They were lazy women, she says. They were sluts. . . . They made mistakes, says Aunt Lydia. We don’t intend to repeat them. Her voice is pious, condescending, the voice of those whose duty it is to tell us unpleasant things for our own
good. . . . All of us here will lick you into shape, says Aunt Lydia, with satisfied cheer. (144-146)

It should be noted that what the handmaids are told by the Aunts is as much propaganda as what Winston Smith creates in The Ministry of Truth. The Aunts are used for a specific purpose—to keep the handmaids in line. The Aunts don't speak the truth any more than the handmaids can speak the truth; they are only mouthpieces for the ideas of the patriarchal leaders of this society. Thus, the imbalance of power is again demonstrated in the way that Gilead has manipulated and controlled relationships between different groups of women such as the handmaids and the Aunts.

Interestingly the most straightforward and informative passage in the book comes from the Commander himself, who explains to Offred in very honest terms how the new Gilead society came about. This passage reveals that the Commander, unlike the Aunts, has the ability to gain and pass on accurate knowledge of the goals and history of Gilead. Those powerful enough, even in Gilead, can do whatever they wish. What he tells Offred reveals the Commander possesses an accurate understanding of the sexist policies of this society:

Sometimes [the Commander] becomes querulous, at other times philosophical; or he wishes to explain things, justify himself. As last night. The problem wasn't only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men. There was
nothing for them anymore. . . . There was nothing for them to do, he says. . . . I'm not talking about the sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. We have stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage. . . . You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, is what he says. We thought we could do better . . . better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some. (272-274)

What this passage also reveals is that the Commander enjoys a freedom enjoyed only by men in this society. He can be completely honest and actually commit the unspeakable; he can evaluate and even question the policies of the new regime. Instead of mouthing the propaganda spoken by the Aunts, that this society benefits all of its members, the Commander speaks honestly and acknowledges that in order for some to enjoy this new life, some also must suffer. And those who suffer are the women.

Thus, in both 1984 and The Handmaid's Tale, the characters function as active participants in their cultures for they were born there, live there, and for all practical purposes, have no option of leaving. At the same time, however, they function as the classic
utopian travellers or tour guides, leading us through societies that are, in many ways, as much alien to them as they are to us. We feel their frustration, bewilderment, and outrage.

Once again, however, Atwood plays with the “traveller-as-tour-guide” tradition common to much of utopian fiction. Until the appendix of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, readers think they are getting the details of Offred’s experience directly from the character herself as they happen. But in the appendix entitled “Historical Notes on The Handmaid’s Tale,” we learn that what we have been reading is, in fact, a “partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies” (379) in which Professors Pieixoto and Wade have reconstructed the tale from “approximately thirty tape cassettes, of the type that became obsolete sometime in the eighties or nineties with the advent of the compact disc” (382). A marvelously ironic touch, one of the few times that Atwood’s text concerns itself with the monstrous technological concerns common to the dystopian tradition, occurs when she discusses the trouble suffered by Pieixoto and Wade in accessing the tapes. “Luckily we had, several years before, with the aid of our excellent resident antiquarian technician, reconstructed a machine capable of playing such tapes, and we immediately set about the painstaking work of transcription” (382).

What is significant to our reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is that the tale itself is reconstructed. The tapes were found unnumbered, camouflaged with various musical selections, arranged in no particular
order, and plagued by accents, obscure referents, and archaisms of Offred's era. As Professor Pieixoto states:

It was up to Professor Wade and myself to arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go; but, as I have said elsewhere, all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research.

(382-383)

What this reveals is that Atwood weaves the two traditions, the "traveller/tour guide" of utopian fiction and the active and rebellious participant of dystopian fiction. Offred is an active participant of Gilead; this tale is the story of her own life. She was born there and exists there as well; she is not a visitor from an alien culture. She also functions as an outsider, a traveller or tour guide by relating to us, the readers, the words of "explanation and history" offered by the Aunt Lydias, the Commanders, the Serena Joys, and the previous Offreds who enter and exit her life. In addition to Offred, there are other tour guides of this text, namely Professors Pieixoto and Wade. These two men, admittedly alien to Gileadean culture, attempt to direct their colleagues and readers of the tale through Gileadean society and through Offred's life. It is clear to us (if not to the professors) that our reading and understanding of this "handmaid's tale" has certainly been affected by the "proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies."
Personal and Literary Influences and Goals of Margaret Atwood and The Handmaid's Tale

Critics have attempted to describe many other influences on Margaret Atwood, in addition to the author's knowledge of utopian and dystopian traditions, that have shaped The Handmaid's Tale. While an author probably has unlimited experiences and memories that can determine and contribute to her work, I would like to highlight five main influences that I believe have found specific development in The Handmaid's Tale. These include Atwood's Canadian heritage, her Puritan ancestry, and works by authors Robert Graves (The White Goddess), Jonathan Swift ("A Modest Proposal"), and George Orwell (1984). This is not meant to be a complete list of those events and authors that have influenced Atwood's text.

According to Frances Bartkowski, the fact that Atwood is Canadian is significant. Canada, a colony and "lesser cousin" of the powerful United States, has a marginalized status, and Atwood's awareness of this has made her sensitive to other marginalized groups. "Canadian writer Atwood . . . whose ears are tuned to the strains of feminist choruses in the United States and France, [makes] a rereading of the questions at hand possible from another geopolitical perspective within the dominant sphere of the United States and also in the 'colonized' sphere from the margins" (134). This influence can be seen directly in Atwood's text in that Offred, like most women around her, is a victim of the patriarchal society around her which presumes to dictate what a proper woman should be. Women in Gileadean society
have definitely been marginalized and their concerns and desires have been ignored by the oppressive regime around them.

Not only does her Canadian status make Atwood sensitive to issues of marginality and victimization, but it also pervades the very subject matter about which she writes. Peter Klappert sees this Canadian consciousness also reflected in much of Atwood's poetry, viewing Atwood's frequent discussions of the benign, powerless "feminine self image" as reflecting the role of Canada, "a post-colonial nation, or that nation's relationship with a dominant neighbor, or that nation's linguistically divided self" (220). Margaret Atwood is interested in the issue of survival, particularly the survival of Canadians in the face of their more-powerful neighbors. According to Barbara Hill Rigney, Atwood uses another text, Survival, to examine and explore her own past through studying Canadian literature. Atwood "discovers a tradition replete with images of victimisation: animals, Indians, women, Eskimos, settlers and explorers are all victims of one another or of nature, just as nature itself is a victim of human beings" (123). And just as the symbol of American literature is the frontier, the dominant image of Canadian fiction, according to Atwood, is survival, the "unheroic survival of victimisation" (123). Offred, too, is a survivor, a woman who has had to do battle against her own memories as well as the physical forces of oppression around her. Not only does she fight to survive physically, she must fight for psychological and spiritual survival. Her dreams, psychological
attempts at escape, reveal this desperate desire to live despite the
horrible life that has been created for her by the Gileadean regime.

Yet another influence from Atwood’s past that can be found in
her novel relates to her Puritan ancestors, especially Mary Webster,
one of the two people to whom *The Handmaid’s Tale* is dedicated.
Mary Webster was a Puritan woman accused of witchcraft who
survived an attempted execution by hanging. Atwood’s interest in
Mary Webster is not just reflected in the dedication of *The Handmaid’s
Tale*. In an essay called “Witches,” found in *Second Words*, Atwood
writes of Mary Webster, “She is my favorite ancestor, more dear to
[my] heart even than privateers and the massacred French Protestants
... because when she was cut down, she was to everyone’s surprise,
not dead ... and if there is one thing I hope I’ve inherited from her,
it’s her neck” (Barkowski 157). If any doubt should remain that
Puritanism and the witch trials were influential to Margaret Atwood,
one need only note the other dedication of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Perry
Miller, author of *The New England Mind* and a Puritan scholar, was a
college professor of Atwood’s. These Puritan influences are quite
important to the text itself because they show Atwood’s understanding
of the dangers of a theocratic society, the kind of religion-state-all-in-
one that early Puritan leaders attempted to establish in America.
These leaders wanted to create their own utopia, their own “Golden
Age” in which God was at the center of every community, at the heart
of every action. This appeared to necessitate that all citizens have
identical religious philosophies and goals. Atwood’s text reveals quite
clearly what happens when all citizens do not share the same religious beliefs and more importantly, when those in power attempt to enforce their dogmatic beliefs on a pluralistic society.

Margaret Atwood’s work was also influenced by the works of three key authors, Robert Graves, Jonathan Swift, and George Orwell. According to one critic, author Robert Graves' work, *The White Goddess*, a text which discusses the many archetypes of the White Goddess or the “Great Mother” myth, has heavily influenced Atwood. The White Goddess is said to evolve through three metamorphoses that, according to Graves, correspond to the three stages of the moon. “The New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon, the red goddess of love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination” (Graves 61). Hers is a life that is cyclic, moving from birth to growth to death to regeneration. She was worshipped under different names and forms in several civilizations, including Greece, North Africa, and Asia Minor. Historically, however, the White Goddess became of secondary importance, being reduced to “consort of the Father-God. Later on, in Judaism, Judaic Christianity, Mohammedanism and Protestant Christianity, the Goddess’s worship disappeared completely to give way to an entirely patriarchal society” (Sciff-Zamaro 33). When we examine the life of Offred, the “handmaid” of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we can also see how Atwood uses elements of the three stages of the White Goddess myth to shape the life of Offred. These elements will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter II.
Jonathan Swift's influence is also apparent in that one of the three epigrams of The Handmaid's Tale comes from Swift's "A Modest Proposal" in which Swift proposes that unwanted Irish children be used for food. Swift satirizes current customs of the English people. For example, he writes of the food these young children will provide, "I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children" (541). Atwood also uses these Swift-like exaggerations that she calls "logical consequences" of current events in the form of the Prayvaganzas (group celebrations) and Salvagings (public executions) of her text. Just as Swift ironically demonstrated that society was only steps away from enacting his ideas, Atwood has maintained time and time again that what she writes may not be that bizarre or improbable. Writes W. J. Keith:

In "A Modest Proposal" itself, the reader is set up for a rational, philanthropic, and viable solution to Ireland's problems only to be shocked at the actual proposal--the eating of surplus infants--and is then forced to recognize the solution as little more than a logical extension of existing policies. . . . Atwood's strategy here, I suggest, is remarkably similar. (125)

George Orwell also valued Swift's work, numbering Swift's Gulliver's Travels "among the six [books] which he would preserve if all
others were to be destroyed" (Mezciems 189). Further, Gorman Beauchamp argues that Orwell uses the same satirical exaggeration in 1984 to arouse "some real opposition to the totalitarian propensities of our age" that Swift used the in A Modest Proposal to create "some real sympathy for the plight of the Irish" (9). It seems difficult to read George Orwell's 1984 without feeling that Atwood was influenced by the author himself. One needs only to examine why these two authors wrote their respective texts to see the connections between the works. When questioned whether she meant to write a prediction of the future or an allegory of the present in her novel The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood responded "both," stating:

Any piece of speculative fiction, and there's a long tradition of it . . . is always based on a projection of elements that are in our society now, and there is in fact nothing in The Handmaid's Tale that human beings have not already done in one form or another, both in the generality and in the detail. They've done it in the past or they are doing it somewhere else now, or we have the technology to do it. . . . It is an extrapolation from reality, if you like, it's a possibility for our society but also it's an 'allegory' of what is already happening. (A Moveable Feast)
This statement of Atwood’s sounds noticeably similar to the words of George Orwell himself. When questioned about his motives for writing *1984*, Orwell once wrote:

> I do not believe that this kind of society will arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something like it could arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences. (Beauchamp 3)

These statements reveal that Atwood and Orwell had similar intentions in creating their dystopic worlds. Their works seek to warn us not only of the future but of the dangerous circumstances in our present as well. Indeed, as Leah Hadomi writes, “We can say that both the utopian and dystopian forms rely on the dynamic interplay between an imaginary world and reality” (119). When we examine the many personal and literary influences of Margaret Atwood, we find that they have worked their way into her writing, especially *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Hers is a work that defies simple classification, for elements of at least two traditions thus far discussed, utopian and dystopian fiction, can be seen in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Where Atwood's text strongly differs from a work such as *1984* is in where it chooses to focus its attentions. Unlike *1984* and other dystopias which focus on technological advancement and the imbalance of power among the
classes, *The Handmaid's Tale* seems more concerned with feminist issues of sexism and discrimination.

While Atwood is first and foremost an author, influenced by her personal and literary backgrounds, she doesn't seem to make many distinctions between her authorial and political obligations. As *The Handmaid’s Tale* is clearly a novel with political implications, it is important to understand the political goals of Atwood, and it is obvious that her political ideology is an intricate part of her writing. In a 1985 interview, several months before the release of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood said:

> The political to me is a part of life. It’s part of everybody’s life. . . . What we mean [by political] is how people relate to a power structure and vice versa. And this is really all we mean by it. We may mean also some idea of participating in the structure or changing it. But the first thing we mean is how is this individual in society? How do the forces of society interact with this person? (Freibert 280)

In another interview, Atwood elaborated on these ideas when she said, “By ‘political’ I mean having to do with power: who’s got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a word, who’s allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how” (Rubenstein 102). This quote seems to indicate that power is viewed as a
commodity by Atwood; it can be purchased, traded, bartered, and denied.

What is significant in Atwood's views of power structures and political responsibility is that no one, no matter how powerful or victimized, is exempt from being "political," from taking responsibility for his or her role in society. Further, no one is immune from criticism for failing to do so. Atwood, it seems, uses her writing to make people aware of their political responsibilities as human beings. Her text cuts through issues of race, class, and gender and age in that all people, by virtue of their humanity, are morally obligated to work for equality and human dignity for all people. Again, in _Second Words_, Atwood writes:

I feel that in order to change society, you have to have a fairly general consciousness of what is wrong—or at least that something is wrong—among the members of the society; call it 'consciousness-raising' if you like; and an examination of the effects of the situation on the heads of those in the society. . . . In other words: to fight the Monster, you have to knows that there is a Monster, and what it is like both in its external and internalized manifestations.

(Rigney 125)

In _The Handmaid's Tale_, Atwood has attempted to alert her readers, through the life of Offred, to some of the "monsters" that exist
in contemporary American society, the monsters of sexism, racism, classism, ageism and the oppression that inevitably follows. Atwood presents these “monsters” in two key ways. The first way, which will be presented in Chapter II, is through the use of feminist imagery and the concern with feminist issues such as sexuality, procreation, self-discovery, and communion. The second way that Atwood deals with issues of oppression is through her study of language as a means to control memory and expression as well as to establish community. The uses of language will be discussed in further detail in Chapter III.
CHAPTER II. FEMINIST ISSUES IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE:

Examining Elements of the Feminist Tradition Including Sexuality, Motherhood, Journeys, Mirrors, the Natural World and the Senses

Reviewing the goals stated in Chapter I by the authors of *1984* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* reveals that Orwell and Atwood had very similar purposes in writing their works. They simply approached these goals from two different perspectives. George Orwell’s *1984* focuses primarily on issues of class division and the manipulation of historical fact. Further, he clearly understood the vital connection between a free press and freedom of thought and speech. Orwell also apparently recognized that the industrial revolution, first originating in England, “preached a work ethic that meant near-slavery for the lower classes trapped in a pseudo-edenic prison. Escape from Eden was now to be a necessary revolt in order to maintain human dignity and enable free will” (Sieber 380).

Margaret Atwood’s text, while equally concerned with issues of power, human dignity, class, and free will, focuses on issues more feminist in nature. Many of the feminist issues Atwood discusses overlap, and it is difficult to analyze the text without appearing to divide and subdivide arbitrarily. There does seem to be a pattern, however, in how Atwood uses feminist imagery to tell us the story of Offred. Offred gradually becomes more and more connected to her world as she moves through three stages of physical and spiritual development. During the first stage, Offred has been defined in terms
of her female self, her ability to have sex and bear children. These compulsory activities determine her value as a “female” in Gilead. We recognize the confusion that Offred finds in this limited definition. In the second stage of Offred’s development, Atwood uses the imagery of the journey motif and the mirror to show Offred’s gradual recognition that she is a psychological and spiritual being as well as physically being a female. This recognition begins to move her beyond the confining stereotyped world of the Gilead female and into a world where she is a complete person. And in the final stage, Atwood uses the natural world and the senses to show that Offred recognizes herself as a part of a larger community of living beings. Offred began by being defined as a female, then defined herself as a spiritual and psychological person, and finally, she has realized that she is part of an entire planet of living creatures, part of a community. With this progression in mind, I will suggest some of Margaret Atwood’s main feminist concerns as they are expressed in The Handmaid’s Tale.

Of central concern to this novel is the issue of a woman’s sexual role in society. Offred, the protagonist and the “handmaid” whose story we read, seems to represent the classic “Madonna-Whore” split that both patriarchal and feminist literature illustrate. The imagery that Atwood uses to describe the handmaids reveals that they are viewed as both pure and defiled. These women, who have uncertain and changing roles in the society of Gilead, are whatever their society labels them. Offred illustrates this, for example, when she explains the procedures to be followed when assigned to a new “post”:
On first days we are permitted front doors, but after that we're supposed to use the back. Things haven't settled down, it's too soon, everyone is unsure about our exact status. After awhile it will be either all front doors or back. Aunt Lydia said she was lobbying for the front. Yours is a position of honor, she said.

(17-18)

At times, these handmaids are referred to as the most pure and untainted of women; terms such as nuns, sacred vessels, seeds, the blessed fruit, the carriers of life are common labels. "We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. . . . We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (176). Indeed it has become illegal for these women to engage in any sexual behavior outside of the socially approved "Ceremony" in which a commander attempts to impregnate his "holy chalice" who has been assigned to his family to bear a child. Even this ceremony, however, has an obvious lack of passion. Offred relays to us the events of one such ceremony:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be
inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. . . . [The Commander] is preoccupied, like a man humming to himself in the shower without knowing he’s humming; like a man who has other things on his mind. It’s as if he’s somewhere else, waiting for himself to come, drumming his fingers on the table while he waits. (121-122)

Just as these women are often put on pedestals as the saviors of humanity, they are also scorned, mostly, it seems, by other women around them. When discussing her relationship with Rita, one of the “Marthas,” or official housekeepers, Offred says, “[Rita’s] face might be kindly if she would smile. But the frown isn’t personal: it’s the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for” (12-13). The Econowives, women of lower social status, also disapprove of the handmaids. On a shopping trip, Offred and her shopping partner Ofglen meet a group of Econowives leading a funeral procession. Says Offred, “We put our hands over our hearts to show these stranger women that we feel with them in their loss. Beneath her veil the first one scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the sidewalk. The Econowives do not like us” (59). The treatment the handmaids receive from the Commanders’ wives is really no better. For example, the wife of Commander Warren says of Janine, a handmaid, “Such a, so well
behaved, not surly like some of them, do their job and that’s that. More like a daughter to you, as you might say. One of the family.” But as soon Janine leaves the room, the Commanders’ wives say, “Little whores, all of them, but still, you can’t be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls?” (147).

With such double messages proliferating in this society, it is really no wonder that Offred refers to herself as “a Sister, dipped in blood,” (11) revealing the obvious confusion she feels. Is she the pure and ethereal “sister” or a real and passionate woman “dipped in blood?” But Offred recognizes another, and perhaps most important function of her sexuality: power. When on yet another shopping trip (this woman shops often; next to getting pregnant, it is her main occupation), Offred fantasizes about becoming sexually involved with a guard, relishing the power her body gives her:

As we walk away I know they’re watching, these two men who aren’t yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. . . . I enjoy the power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. . . . They have no outlets now except themselves, and that’s a sacrilege. There are no magazines, no more films, no more
substitutes; only me and my shadow, walking away from the two men, who stand at attention, stiffly, by a roadblock, watching our retreating shapes. (30)

Not only does Offred have power over the young border guards, she exhibits power over both the Commander and his wife. Of her relationship with the Commander, she says, “It’s difficult for me to believe I have power over him, of any sort, but I do; although it’s of an equivocal kind” (272). Offred also recognizes, in her relationship with the Commander, the power it gives her over the Commander’s wife, saying, “Now that I was seeing the Commander on the sly, if only to play his games and listen to him talk, our functions were no longer as separate as they should have been in theory. I was taking something away from her, although she didn’t know it” (208). In theory, the structure of Gilead does not allow for symbiotic relationships in which power can be traded or even shared. But as Offred, the Commander, and Serena Joy demonstrate, trade-offs can and do occur.

Offred is, at times, quite assertive about her sexuality and her desires for a passionate life. She is quickly learning the rules for survival in Gilead and using her sexuality to achieve her own goals. Thus, she is becoming the “whore” she is proclaimed to be. At other times, though, she is passive, modest, perfectly in keeping with her role as a sacred vessel. For example, while shopping, she and her partner come across a group of Japanese tourists. Her descriptions of the
female tourists reveal her lack of ease in what she has been taught to view as brazen behavior:

I can’t help staring. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen skirts that short on women. The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant, the high-heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture. The women teeter on their spiked feet as if on stilts, but off balance; their backs arch at the waist, thrusting the buttocks out. Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall, of the time before. (37-38)

Perhaps the most frightening comment that Offred makes in this passage deals with her own changing mental state. “We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this” (38).

Offred is even uncomfortable with her own nakedness, claiming, “I sit in the chair, with the lights off, in my red dress, hooked and buttoned. You can think clearly only with your clothes on” (185). This discomfort is reiterated in a passage in which Offred describes perceptions of her own body while taking a bath:
My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. Shameful, immodest. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely. (82)

In these passages, it can be seen that the conflicting sexual roles for women are alive and present in the Republic of Gilead, and more importantly, in the mind of Offred herself. At times, she is powerful, confident, in control of her sexuality, reflecting the “modern woman” over whom the Commander laments because women like these have left the men “nothing to do.” At other times, however, she is shy, uncertain, guilty because of her sexuality. These conflicting roles exist simultaneously in Offred because she is at the mercy of those around her. Her name, her occupation, her entire history have been shaped and dictated by those who hold power over her. This society has taken every precaution to eliminate private and independent thought from its citizens; the leaders of Gilead seem quite prepared to make all decisions for their citizens. It follows, then, that Offred would base her thoughts, even those as personal as her own body image, on what she has been told. And since she has been sent contradictory messages,
she feels conflicting thoughts about herself. For example, when the Commander takes her to Jezebel's, a secret whorehouse for other commanders and visiting dignitaries, Offred shows that she understands that she is both sacred and a whore. She is the sacred possession of the Commander, off limits to all others, and she is a whore because she is displaying her sexuality for all to see:

It occurs to me he is showing off. He is showing me off, to them, and they understand that, they are decorous enough, they keep their hands to themselves, but they review my breasts, my legs, as if there's no reason why they shouldn't. But he is also showing off to me. He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. . . . It's a juvenile display, the whole act, and pathetic; but it's something I understand.

(307)

Offred's sexuality and her assessment of her sexuality differ greatly from another dystopian woman, the character of Julia in Orwell's 1984. Critics have argued that Orwell was not concerned with a presentation of feminist issues, and while this may be true, it doesn't mean that we cannot examine his treatment of the sexuality of women in his text. Julia is really the only woman who is at all interested in sex, yet she doesn't seem to use her sexuality for political purposes. In other words, she doesn't use it to attain anything outside of sexual satisfaction itself. Whereas Offred uses her sexuality with the
Commander and Nick to gain things (hand lotion, magazines, information, safety from Serena Joy, information about her daughter), Julia’s engagement in sex, and thus her rebellion against the doctrines of The Party “is grounded in her desire for pleasure and for the pursuit of a personal life” (Patai 866). Unlike Offred, Julia isn’t perceived as a sexual being from the instant readers and Winston Smith see her. We are told, in fact, that Smith “disliked her from the very first moment of seeing her. He knew the reason. It was because of the atmosphere of hockey fields and cold baths and community hikes and general clean-mindedness which she managed to carry about with her” (Orwell 12). Even after Winston falls in love with Julia and is obsessed with her sexuality, he is still most closely connected with a man, O’Brien. As Daphne Patai writes:

Julia’s love for Winston makes him healthier, whereas O’Brien’s attentions destroy him physically; but Winston’s true alliance, as we have seen, is with O’Brien, who engages him in combat and recognizes him as a worthy opponent—a recognition that means more to Winston than Julia’s love. (867)

Thus, while Orwell didn’t focus as exclusively on the roles of a woman’s sexuality, we can still glimpse, from Julia’s behavior, what he may have thought of the issue. Julia is the most sexually active woman in the novel, unlike Smith’s former wife Katharine, who is depicted as frigid and who engages in sexual intercourse only for the sake of The
Party. By contrast, Julia’s sexuality is almost animalistic and has but two goals—to seek pleasure and avoid pain. She doesn’t consider the political or social ramifications of her behavior. It is Winston himself who refers to sexual intercourse as “a political act.” Offred, on the other hand, seems to have a more clear and developed understanding of how her sexuality can both confine and empower her in Gilead.

Closely connected to female sexuality is the issue of a woman’s reproductive power. *The Handmaid’s Tale* demonstrates what occurs when a society adopts the theme that “anatomy is destiny,” in that every woman in this text is defined and regulated in terms of her ability and willingness to bear children. Handmaids, of course, are the sacred vessels who have signed up for their duties as surrogate mothers for wealthy white families. Commanders’ wives are either too old or physically unable to bear children themselves; they do little other than socialize and tend to their gardens. Interestingly, it is assumed that any reproductive problem exists because of the woman. “There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (79). Marthas and Aunts are menopausal women who have adopted roles as housekeepers and the educators who run the Rachel and Leah Centers that indoctrinate the handmaids. Women who cannot bear or have refused to bear children for the state (such as former nuns or feminists) have been labeled as “Unwomen” and sent to the mysterious and life-threatening “Colonies.” Econowives adopt the Martha and handmaid roles, keeping house and bearing children if
they can, but because of their low social status and value (like Orwell’s Proles), they are not considered good enough to bear children for the upper echelon of Gileadean society. And finally, the women who inhabit the Jezebel club have been sterilized, functioning as prostitutes for men in high places. These categories are most disturbing because they deny the individuality of women, their intelligence, creativity, humor, and strength by pigeonholing, imprisoning her.

Another issue of reproduction discussed by the text is midwifery. Ironically, in a society in which virtually every source of power has been willingly turned over to men, women in Gilead have assumed almost total control of the birthing process, from delivery to the naming of the child. This, of course, makes perfect sense, for this is a world retreating into its past, back to a time where a woman wasn’t wired to machines, electrodes coming out of her every which way so that she looked like a broken robot, an intravenous drip feeding into her arm. Some man with a searchlight looking up between her legs, where she’s been shaved, a mere beardless girl, a trayful of bright sterilized knives, everyone with masks on. A cooperative patient. (146)

In this one instance then, it is the men who have been stripped of their former positions of power. As Offred tells us, “I see one of the doctors looking out the window of the van. I wonder what they do in there, waiting. Play cards, most likely, or read; some masculine
pursuit. Most of the time they aren’t needed at all; they’re only allowed in if it can’t be helped” (146). This world is afraid of the “progress” that turned the natural processes of pregnancy and birth into medical events that could be speeded up, slowed down, or the ultimate fear, terminated completely.

The pre-Gileadean world in which women demanded total control of reproductive abilities has to some degree materialized, ironically, in the Republic of Gilead. The choice for motherhood is no longer in the domain of a single person, the mother, nor is the actual biological process of birth. The child and the experience of childbearing have become community property in which all women share equally. Interestingly, Gilead’s communal attitudes towards birth appear similar to those of societies of Herland, Ata, Whileaway, the Wanderground and Mattapoisett in that the rearing of children has been pulled from the private sphere and turned over to the society as a whole. In Herland, for example, all women are mothers, sisters, guardians except those extremely rare women who are not considered fit enough to raise their children. In Mattapoisett, Luciente explains to Connie how children are reared. “It’s not the one-to-one bind you had with your daughter, from what you say. We have more space, more people to love us. We grow up closest to our mothers, but we swim close to all our mems [family members]” (133). In Mattapoisett, however, each child has three mothers, males can breast-feed their children, and children are formally separated from their mothers when they reach puberty. After their children have completed their rites of passage,
the mothers aren’t even allowed to speak to them for three months “lest we forget we aren’t mothers anymore and person [the child] is an equal member” (116). In all of these cases, the birth process isn’t up to an individual woman but rather to a society of people; the child doesn’t belong to one but belongs to, and is cared for, by the entire community. Striking differences exist, however, between the feminist utopias and Gilead. First of all, in Gilead, a woman has no choice in becoming pregnant. That choice has been made for her, not with her. Secondly, her connection to her child is immediately severed when the child is taken from her arms and given over to the family of the commander. She no longer has any say in the life and upbringing of that child, and after six months of breast feeding, she is moved to another family and will never see her child again. In the feminist utopias, the bond between mother and child isn’t severed; it is shared with a community of people who wish to help the mother, not replace her.

The Handmaid’s Tale also presents three very personal and significant stories of motherhood. Like the three cycles of the White Goddess/Great Mother myth, these stories reflect the stages of Offred’s life as a woman: birth and growth (Offred’s past relationship with her mother); love and battle (Offred’s relationship with a husband and daughter who have been stolen away from her); and death and rejuvenation (Offred’s “death” as a handmaid and her future relationship with her unborn child).

Offred’s relationship with her mother, a feminist who had her daughter at the age of thirty-seven, is clearly drawn to illustrate pre-
Gileadean society, a time of mixed blessings for women. In this society, women, including Offred, could be independent and self-supporting. “All those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing” (224). Offred’s mother makes this independence obvious when she says of her former husband:

A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women. Not that your father wasn’t a nice guy and all, but he wasn’t up to fatherhood. Not that I expected it of him. Just do the job, then you can bugger off, I said, I make a decent salary, I can afford daycare. So, he went to the coast and sent Christmas cards. . . . They aren’t a patch on a woman except they’re better at fixing cars and playing football. Just what we need for the improvement of the human race, right? (155-156)

The time “before,” however, was also hazardous for women, a time when exploitation, mutilation, harassment and assault were very real dangers. Offred still remembers “the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: Don’t open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. . . . Don’t stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble” (32-33). Gilead society, then, has used protection from these dangers as a “trade off” for the freedoms these women are expected to surrender. As Aunt Lydia
reminds her "girls, "There is more than one kind of freedom. . . .
Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (33).

Offred's relationship with her mother, and the past her mother represents, is certainly confusing for readers of this text. Her mother, who has been declared an "Unwoman" (similar to an "Unperson" in Orwell's Oceania), has been sent to the Colonies, the Gileadean version of a German death camp. Thus she, much like the past of Gileadean society, has been swept away, at least physically. Her feminist convictions still live to some degree in the memories of her daughter who alternates between silent contempt and profound pride in the actions of her mother. "I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms. I didn't want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once" (157). At several times during the novel, when readers want Offred to be more aggressive and in charge of her life, she makes comments like these which are both puzzling and disappointing because of their lack of passion and commitment to her own freedom and dignity. Offred's ambivalence and reluctance to act demonstrate that the simple repetition of another's rhetoric is not enough to bring about change. Change must be personally significant, but every so often, when faced with comments like these, we are left
wondering just how much, or little, Offred was willing to sacrifice to instigate change, either for herself or for her own daughter.

Offred’s relationship with her daughter (who, like Offred, is never referred to by her actual name) brings us directly into the present Gileadean society. While some of Offred’s memories reflect her life with her husband Luke before the Republic of Gilead established its regime, the most poignant memories deal with Luke and Offred’s escape and subsequent capture by Gileadean guards. It is Offred’s marriage to Luke, the birth of her daughter, and their abductions that change Offred from the White Goddess of birth and growth, innocent and naive, to the Red Goddess of love and battle. Her love for her family is genuine, reflected when she says, “Lying in bed, with Luke, his hand on my rounded belly. The three of us, in bed, she kicking, turning over within me. . . . If I thought this would never happen again I would die. But this is wrong, nobody dies from lack of sex. It’s lack of love we die from” (131-132).

Offred also demonstrates her ability to be a Goddess of battle when she tells of her attempts to save her daughter from growing up in Gileadean society. In describing her daughter’s kidnapping, we are reminded of the abduction of Persephone by Pluto. While Persephone was gathering violets and lilies and filling her basket and her apron with them, “Pluto saw her, loved her, and carried her off. She screamed for help to her mother and her companions. . . . Ceres sought her daughter all over the world” (Bulfinch 53). This allusion to an ancient Greek story would seem to indicate that the possession of a
woman and the love of a mother for her daughter are both universal and timeless. Offred’s nightmares of the abduction of her daughter are equally horrifying:

I’m running, with her, holding her hand, pulling, dragging her through the bracken, she’s only half awake. . . . I pull her to the ground and roll on top of her to cover her, shield her. Quiet, I say again, my face is wet, sweat or tears. . . . I curl myself around her, keeping my hand over her mouth. It’s too late, we come apart, my arms are held, and the edges go dark. . . . I see her, going away from me, through the trees which are already turning, red and yellow, holding her arms to me, being carried away. (96-97)

In keeping with the White Goddess myth, Offred literally becomes a red goddess, a woman dressed from head to toe in a red uniform, a “Sister, dipped in blood.” Nor does her love or her battling end, for she is haunted by memories of her love for Luke and her child and her battle to save this child and regain her former life. For Offred, these memories are very much in the present, triggered by real events in her life like the smell of shampoo or the sound of bath water running. It is this “red” stage of the Great Mother myth that characterizes Offred’s life story as a handmaid. What is devastating is that Offred’s daughter seems to be taking over her mother’s role as the White Goddess and thus continuing the pattern. Offred never actually
sees her daughter physically; she only sees pictures of the child, one when the girl is “wearing a dress I’d never seen, white and down to the ground” (52) and one when she has become “so tall and changed. Smiling a little now, so soon, and in her white dress as if for an olden-days First Communion” (296). We assume that since this girl has been given to a Commander and his wife, she, like all of the other little girls of Gilead, will mature and become one of the many veiled, dressed-in-white virgin brides married to equally virginal Guardians at a Prayvaganza. Thus, the cycle continues.

One of the most intriguing features of this story is the question of what happens to Offred as she is carted off to the “Eyes” van by Nick, a Guardian who either arranges her escape or condemns her to death. What is also uncertain is whether Offred is actually carrying Nick’s child as she claims. She tells us, “I put [Nick’s] hand on my belly. It’s happened, I say. I feel it has. A couple of weeks and I’ll be certain. . . . It’s yours I say. It will be yours, really. I want it to be” (348). There seems to be a psychological and spiritual change in Offred; she has ceased to be a victim, plagued by the demons of the past, the memories of her lost mother, husband, daughter, friend. Like the Black Goddess, the goddess of death and rejuvenation, something has died in Offred and something newly created has taken its place. She has seemingly accepted the fact that her old life, her daughter, “the little girl who is now dead” (108) and her husband are gone for good. Further, we get a sense that Offred’s life as a handmaid, as a red goddess, is coming to an
end when she says, reflecting on the previous Offred who hanged herself on the chandelier:

I look out at the dusk and think about its being a winter. . . . Freezing to death is painless, they say, after the first chill. You lie back in the snow like an angel made by children and go to sleep. Behind me I feel her presence, my ancestress, my double, turning in midair under the chandelier, in her costume of stars and feathers, a bird stopped in flight, a woman made into an angel. . . . Get it over, she says. I’m tired of this melodrama. I’m tired of keeping silent. There’s no one you can protect, your life has value to no one. I want it finished.

(375)

It is hardly coincidental that the last image we have of Offred, dressed in her red dress, is of her getting into a black van, entering the final stage of her life. Whether her life ends in this black stage or she gives birth to her daughter, a new White Goddess and thus continues the cycle, is uncertain. The imagery of the last sentences of her tale leaves this ending ambiguous and again reflects the White Goddess mythology. “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (378).
In contrast to Atwood's in-depth study of motherhood, George Orwell gives very little direct attention to the topic. But readers of 1984 are offered one mother-child relationship from which they can draw inferences. Like the relationship between Offred and her mother, what we learn of the bond between Winston Smith and his mother via memories represents a time and place that no longer exist. Winston's memories are more distorted than Offred's however, often possessing a surrealistic feeling. In one example, Winston dreams of his mother and his baby sister who are being taken away from him. Like his memories of his mother, his account is equally murky, leading us to believe that any notes, letters, pictures or mementoes of his family were long ago destroyed.

[Winston] must, he thought, have been ten or eleven years old when his mother disappeared. She was a tall, statuesque, rather silent woman with slow movements and magnificent fair hair. . . . His mother was sitting in some place deep beneath him . . . down in some subterranean place--the bottom of a well for instance, or a very deep grave . . . sinking down, down into the green waters which in another moment must hide [his mother and sister] from sight forever. He was out in the light and air while they were being sucked down to
death. . . . Tragedy, he perceived, belonged to the ancient time, to a time when there were still privacy, love, and friendship, and where the members of a family stood by one another without needing to know the reason. (27-28)

Orwell, then, limits his discussion of motherhood to a few distorted images of Winston’s dreams of playing board games with his mother or of her disappearance. While this relationship may in part demonstrate Winston’s fading and distorted memories of his past life, we as readers don’t learn much about the role of motherhood in this society because we only see Winston’s mother as she is retreating from him. Nor do we ever hear the feelings or experiences of motherhood from the mother’s point of view. It is only the male voices of Winston and O’Brien that are loud and clear in this text. Both Winston and Offred, then, have somewhat vague memories of their mothers, women who both nurtured and infuriated them, but these women have disappeared, and their children have been left with a sense of abandonment. Offred’s mother disappeared because she was useless, no longer able to bear children, and because her feminist rhetoric was dangerous to the powers of Gilead. Likewise, Winston’s mother was viewed as useless as she was a woman lacking in education and social status and thus of no use to the Party. Further, we can infer that she was dangerous in some way, as Winston tells us that both of his parents were “swallowed up in one of the first great purges of the Fifties” (28). Thus, we do learn that mothers in Oceania were
essentially as helpless and oppressed as those in Gilead, and could be quickly and quietly disposed of.

The Republic of Gilead is a patriarchal culture that values and defines a woman based solely on her sexual and reproductive abilities, oppresses her and struggles to make her forget that any other kind of society ever existed. Atwood has focused on such themes as sexuality, motherhood, power, submission, remembering and forgetting. Because of the pain such a life brings, Offred’s entire existence in Gilead is a physical and psychological struggle. Not only does she struggle to find love and passion where seemingly none exist, she also struggles to find and understand her own experience and identity. This is quite understandable since the woman is faced with conflicting images of herself at every turn. Is she still a daughter if her mother has been erased from record? Is she still a wife if her husband is gone? Is she still a mother if her daughter thinks she is dead? Is she a whore because of what she signed up to do? Is she even a woman, since she is only one step away from being declared an “Unwoman?” Is she a human being at all since she no longer has freedom or her own name? Fortunately, Offred refuses to see herself within the physical confines established by the regime. Throughout the novel, Offred comes to see herself in more complete and less confused terms, as a thinking and feeling human being rather than a body that can be imprisoned, raped, impregnated, or killed. This self discovery isn’t immediate but it does happen throughout the novel.
In many feminist texts, the metaphor for growing self discovery is the physical journey, and it has been used by Atwood in her novels and poetry as well. For example, in her latest novel *Cat’s Eye*, the narrator Elaine takes two journeys, both of which are woven together throughout the text. One journey is physical in that Elaine returns to her home town of Toronto for an art exhibition of her work. Not only does she return to the city, she returns to significant places from her youth such as the old drugstore, the creek and footbridge where “bad men” were thought to lurk at night, the loft she shared with her former husband Jon. “I’ve been walking for hours it seems, down the hill to the evening, downtown, where the streetcars no longer run. It’s evening, one of those gray watercolor washes, like liquid dust, the city comes up with in the fall. The weather at any rate is still familiar” (8).

More important than the actual physical movement is the psychological journey Elaine takes as she wanders through and actually relives the memories of her childhood. It is this journey that is the most painful for Elaine as she remembers being tormented by childhood friends who called her names, barked out orders, and on one occasion, endangered Elaine’s life as they made her walk on a partially frozen creek to retrieve her hat. This journey takes its toll on Elaine as she both anticipates and dreads meeting these former friends, especially Cordelia, the girl who tormented Elaine the most. “Cordelia must be living somewhere. She could be within a mile of me, she could be right on the next block. But finally I have no idea what I would do if I bumped into her by accident. . . . I can feel my throat tightening, a
pain along the jawline. I've started to chew my fingers again. There's blood, a taste I remember" (8-9). Atwood's works, according to Catherine McLay, involve protagonists who are "in search of their identity, [and] the novels are an exploration of inner space, the exterior landscape becoming a projection of the inner mental journey" (123).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's quest for self-identity and understanding is also symbolized by the journey motif. However, Offred is not allowed to physically move through Gilead society. Her travels are confined to one excursion to Jezebel's and several shopping trips. These trips, however, are far from unsupervised romps across the countryside. Offred has a shopping partner, Ofglen, but "the truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable" (25-26). Further, barricades, guards and Eyes (informants) are constantly a threat. Finally, Offred has been tattooed so that she cannot journey too far because she is a "precious national resource" (107).

Because Offred is limited by Gileadean law in taking physical journeys, her trips are psychological, moving backward in time in an attempt to find some understanding of what has happened to her and what she has become in this new society. These journeys generally take place at night, as these are the times that Offred has to herself. She tells us, "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. . . . The night is my time out. Where should I go?" (49).
In her psychological travels, Offred often flashes back to the past, and these flashbacks serve two purposes. First of all, Atwood uses these flights to inform readers about Offred’s past life, her relationships with her best friend Moira, her mother, her marriage to Luke, and the birth of her daughter. We also get, through these remembrances, visions of pre-Gileadean society, a society frighteningly similar to our own. We learn of the toxic waste, assassination of the President and most of Congress on the President’s Day Massacre by Gileadean leaders that was blamed on Islamic fanatics, the suspension of the Constitution, the establishment of the new ruling regime.

While these glimpses are helpful from a narrative point of view, I feel the second purpose of these dream sequences is more important, both to Offred and to us. These mental journeys allow Offred to re-evaluate her life and her ideas in light of her present oppression, to examine how a society like Gilead could ever have come into power in the first place. She comments on the apathy of her previous life:

Is that how we lived, then? But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time.
Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. (74)

Apparently, Offred was not the only person guilty of such ignoring. Even when reading objective reports of factual events, Offred says, “The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams
dreamt by others. . . . They were too melodramatic, they had a
dimension that was not the dimension of our lives” (74). Finally, these
memories allow Offred to reassess male and female power
relationships of then and now. As she sits in her little prison of a
bedroom until she is summoned, she uses the time to think about how
women have traditionally been used by men:

There’s time to spare. This is one of the things I
wasn’t prepared for—the amount of unfilled
time, the long parentheses of nothing. Time as
white sound. . . . I remember walking in art
galleries, through the nineteenth century: the
obsession they had then with harems. . . .
Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men
who’d never been there. These pictures were
supposed to be erotic, and I thought that they
were, at the time; but now I see what they were
really about. They were paintings about
suspended animation; about waiting, about
objects not in use. They were paintings about
boredom. But maybe boredom is erotic, when
women do it for men. (89)

This passage clearly demonstrates a growing awareness for Offred, an
awareness of her own position in Gileadean society and an awareness
of the roles of women throughout time. Now that Offred herself is
"suspended in time," an object not in use, she pays attention to how
women spend their free time, to paintings which now tell her how women’s minds and bodies have always been completely controlled by men. She also realizes that not only is a woman’s action dominated. So too is her inaction. For a woman used to ignoring the painful realities of life, these revelations are striking indeed.

Offred’s psychological journey is not without its consequences. The journeys into her past, particularly those dealing with the loss of her daughter, are quite painful for her, as this passage indicates:

I’m dreaming that I am awake. I dream that I get out of bed and walk across the room, not this room, and go out the door, not this door. I’m at home, one of my homes, and she in her small green nightgown with the sunflower on the front, her feet bare, and I pick her up and feel her arms and legs go around me and I begin to cry, because I know then that I’m not awake. (139)

After dreaming of her daughter’s abduction, Offred says, “I sit up on the rug, wipe my wet face with my sleeve. Of all the dreams this is the worst” (98). These dreams refuse to leave Offred alone, and they succeed in combining the pain of the present with the loss of her past.

Offred is a woman trapped in a horrible reality from which no immediate physical escape is present. Even suicide is off limits, as all sharp edges and hooks (for hanging) have been removed. Her only escape is her fantasy life, the one part of her that cannot be controlled
by the Gileadean theocracy. One is reminded of the protagonist of Charlotte Gilman Perkin's "The Yellow Wallpaper" who battles against her oppression at the expense of her own sanity. This unnamed woman (or perhaps we should call her Ofjohn, since she is completely dominated by her husband) also uses her mind to journey at night, watching her wallpaper for signs of a life she herself is not allowed to live. Both of these women, created almost 100 years apart, tell stories of the spiritual and emotional journeys they need to take in order to feel alive, demonstrating that women in these positions have no choice. Frank Davey cites as a common characteristic of Atwood's fiction the author's concern with the victimization and survival of transient or traveller characters. Davey writes:

Where do refugees go? Physically they indeed end up in transient accommodations--hotel rooms, rooming houses, apartments--of Atwood's fiction; spiritually or psychologically, they go to more distant places. 'Underground' in Atwood's writing is the term that summarizes all the various escapes that the 'refugee' can make from alienating rationalism. . . . Sometimes the character withdraws in order to protect both herself and another from the unpredictabilities of emotion. (109)

In addition to using psychological journeys to generate memories and insights from the past, Offred may be using these journeys in yet
another way. In an article entitled "Sufi Mysticism in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale," Nancy Workman suggests that Offred is not only using her inner journeys to achieve self-discovery; she uses them to reject the traditional Christian patriarchy that oppresses her. The Sufi tradition, according to Workman, has always honored and celebrated its women as saints, teachers, and leaders from early on. This sounds more like the White Goddess/Great Mother myth than classical Judeo-Christian traditions. Thus, Offred is embracing a means of spiritual enlightenment that may be directly contradictory to the teachings of Gilead.

Workman also feels that the Sufi proverb is significant when approached from the context of the Sufi spiritual tradition. The first practitioners devoted themselves to "interior spiritual development, to 'interiority,' or private mystical union with God, sometimes at the expense of political or social action" (12-13). Workman feels that Offred is a clear practitioner of Sufism from the beginning of the novel in that she practices ritualized behaviors such as "controlled breathing during which she hears 'the sound of my own heart, opening and closing, opening and closing, opening' (190) during her attempts to sort out the complexity of her life before her" (14). Offred may be using elements from the Sufi tradition to guide her own inner explorations. She is not allowing her spiritual discovery to be controlled by others, by Aunts or Commanders or other handmaids. She is in charge of her own destiny.
Another symbol that is used to depict Offred’s growing self-awareness is that of the mirror, an object common to literature as a symbol of perception and vanity as well as a symbol of self-doubt and anxiety. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, mirrors are used into two main ways, these also demonstrating the stages of the protagonist’s psychological development. The first way, found primarily in the first half of the novel, is to distort or prohibit Offred’s discovery of herself. The second way mirrors are used, primarily in the second half of the novel, is to illuminate, reflect, and enlighten Offred, and thus, aid her in her journey toward self discovery.

At the beginning of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred is a character who is greatly confused; the world that she has known has just been turned upside down, her family taken away from her, her mind filled with drugs and propaganda, her freedom stripped away. One way that people get an understanding of who and what they are is to see themselves physically, so see what they look like. This is just one of many freedoms, however, that has been taken away from handmaids like Offred. We learn during the novel that mirrors, or any reflecting surfaces, have been removed from the handmaids’ surroundings. “All this bathroom lacks from the time before is a doll whose skirt conceals the extra roll of toilet paper. Except that the mirror over the sink has been taken out and replaced by an oblong of tin, and the door has no lock, and there are no razors, of course. There were incidents in bathrooms at first” (81). Even at the Rachel and Leah Centers, “the mirrors have been replaced here too by oblongs of dull gray metal”
Presumably, these mirrors have been removed as a precautionary measure, but a more important reason exists. These handmaids have no need for mirrors for they have no need to be concerned about physical appearances. They are the virginal sacred vessels now, not real people. “As in a nunnery too, there are few mirrors” (10).

Mirrors do exist in several public places throughout the novel, but again, Offred’s access to these mirrors is limited. Often she is not allowed in the room for long enough to get a clear image of herself. “The marble mantelpiece to my right and the mirror over it and bunches of flowers were just shadows, then, at the edges of my eyes” (20). While walking along the street, she sees her “silhouette in the plate glass window” (37) but cannot stand there for long because of the Eyes who may report her strange behavior. Many times, she is quickly moving past the mirror, unable to get a clear image of what she seeks. These mirrors seem to reveal disturbing, distorted images duplicating the distorted way that society views its handmaids and that Offred may be viewing herself. Offred encounters a mirror as she is racing up the stairs. “I go up the stairs, my face, distant and white and distorted, framed in the hall mirror, which bulges outward like an eye under pressure” (65). Later, on the way to the doctor’s office, she looks in the “black-mirror wall of the elevator,” (77) but she can see only the back of the head of the Guardian who accompanies her.

Interestingly, one of Atwood’s scenes involving mirrors creates an allusion to another text involving a woman who is forced to wear
red as a symbol of her reproductive and sexual nature. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne wears a scarlet “A” to symbolize her adulterous past. In one scene, she is summoned to the Governor’s home so her abilities as a mother can be assessed. While waiting in the hallway, she sees her image in the polished mirrored surface of a suit of armor. “Owing to the peculiar effect of this convex mirror, the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed to be absolutely hidden behind it” (Hawthorne 115). Offred sees a similar image of herself early in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

There remains a mirror, on the hall wall. If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round convex, a pier glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dripped in blood. (11)

The connections between Hester and the handmaid are instructive. Both are women whose lives are governed by a strict religious code, both have daughters who are living proof that the women have failed to live up to the standards of their communities.
Hester must wear her scarlet letter to demonstrate her sinful behavior, and Offred is told of her daughter, “She’s in good hands ... with people who are fit. You are unfit” (52). The fact that the mirrors distort their respective “costumes” reveals the distorted ways in which they are viewed and persecuted by their societies. In each case, the woman disappears behind the symbolic redness. And finally, both women rebel against their oppressive societies, Hester by her silence in refusing to name the father of her child, and Offred in her covert relationships with the Commander, Serena Joy, Nick, Moira, Ofglen, and the May Day movement.

It is only after Offred begins to break rules, to abandon her prescribed role as a handmaid, that she gains access to mirrors, to her image, and ultimately, to herself. This process isn’t immediate, but we see the pattern developing. When she commits her first illegal act of leaving her room at night to steal a flower from Serena’s parlour, she says, “Now I can see outlines, gleams: from the mirror, the bases of lamps, the vases” (126). In her second defiant act, kissing Nick, she tells us, “He too is illegal, here, with me, he can’t give me away. Nor I him; for the moment we’re mirrors. He puts his hand on my arm, pulls me against him” (127). After she begins her secret visits with the Commander, the mirror imagery is quite frequent. She is allowed to see fashion magazines of the past, leading her to a discussion of how magazines dealt in “transformations: they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another. . . . They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and
transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality” (201).

Not only is Offred transforming into a handmaid who lets the rules slide a bit, she is becoming subversive to the most important of the rules of a system that oppresses her. The first time that Offred and Ofglen are truly honest with each other, revealing their hatred for the system, corresponds with the first time they really look into each others’ eyes with the help of the glass window. At the Sacred Scrolls shop, Offred says:

What I see is not the machines, but Ofglen, reflected in the glass of the window. She’s looking straight at me. We can see each other’s eyes. This is the first time I’ve ever seen Ofglen’s eyes, directly, steadily, not aslant. . . . She holds my stare in the glass, level, unwavering. Now it’s hard to look away. There’s a shock in this seeing; it’s like seeing somebody naked for the first time. (217)

Offred’s next subversive act is also associated with a mirror. She is “decorated” by the Commander with clothes and makeup of the “time before,” and her strongest reaction is, “I feel stupid; I want to see myself in a mirror” (300). This mirror is provided for her immediately, “a large silver-backed hand mirror for me. I recognize it as Serena Joy’s. He must have borrowed it from her room” (300). Not only does the Commander give Offred the mirror, he holds it while she applies
make-up, inadvertently aiding in her private rebellion. The rules do seem to be made for this man to break as he wishes.

At Jezebel’s, where the Commander takes Offred, where women need to be aware of their sexual appeal and appearance, “they haven’t removed the mirror, there’s a long one opposite the sofa. You need to know, here, what you look like” (314). It is at Jezebel’s that “in this ample mirror under the white light” Offred takes “a good look, slow and level” (329) at herself. It is at this moment that her feelings towards the Commander change, now that she has finally gotten a good look at what she has become. Her clothes, her makeup, even her tattoo, circled around her ankle like a bracelet, tell Offred that in Gilead, she is nothing more than property. She may have thought herself important or invaluable to the Commander, the “other woman” who understands his every need, but when the Commander dresses her garishly, takes her to Jezebel’s and parades her around like a prized animal, she gets a clear picture of how little she is valued. Offred recognizes that she too could be slaughtered at any time like a pig that is kept and fattened only as long as it serves its purpose. The mirror here has delivered a devastatingly truthful message to Offred about how things really work in Gilead, and this message only reinforces Offred’s desire to be treated as a human being.

This scene is interesting in another way, for it becomes a counterpart to a similar scene in 1984 in which Winston Smith, after being tortured and mistreated for months at the hands of his “owner” O’Brien, is forced to look closely at himself in a mirror. “Before he
knew what he was doing he had collapsed onto a small stool that stood beside the bed and burst into tears. He was aware of his ugliness, his gracelessness, a bundle of bones in filthy underclothes sitting weeping in the harsh white light; but he could not stop himself” (224-225).

Where the mirror for Offred has helped to strengthen her resolve to see herself as a human being, it has become the final blow for Winston. For Atwood and Orwell, a clear image of oneself can be both enlightening and devastating.

Offred sees another image of herself as she descends the staircase with the Commander’s wife on her way to an illicit meeting with Nick. By this time, she has been making so many secret deals with people, she doesn’t know which side she is on. “I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape, in the brief glass eye of the mirror, as we descend. Me, my obverse” (336). In one of the final images of the book, when Offred is being led away by the Eyes, Serena Joy is standing “in the hallway, under the mirror, looking up, incredulous” (377). These mirrors, then, follow Offred’s pattern of becoming more and more rebellious, breaking more and more rules. The mirrors have not completely reflected who and what Offred has become, but they have showed her that she is not an empty vessel void of thoughts and feelings. Thus, when she is led away at the end of the novel, whatever her fate, she has triumphed because as she is led past that mirror and out the door, she has committed the ultimate sin against the Commander and his wife; she has escaped them.
According to David Ketterer, “The circular mirror comprehends and encompasses most of the novel’s significant themes: viable ovaries, pregnancy, surveillance, imprisonment, hanged bodies, cyclical process . . . and finally the lies of human reality—the mirror conveys only images of reality and renders Offred as a ‘distorted shadow’ ” (212). Ketterer’s claims are valid to a point, but I feel he fails to see how mirrors demonstrate the growing awareness and self-discovery of Offred, from a naive daughter and wife who follows the rules of whatever “system” rules her to a woman capable of subversive acts to preserve her sanity. She is no longer the passive object of the mirror, the blurry and “distorted shadow.” Rather, she is the active observer, a controlling and expressive participant in her own life.

Sexuality and motherhood help Offred recognize her role as a woman, just as journeying and looking at mirrors allow her to view herself as a total person with dreams and emotions. But Offred’s most vital discovery deals with her relationship to life around her, to the natural world as well as to her fellow human beings. Previously, Offred has told us how she ignored life, how in hoping that the stories of murders and pollution weren’t true, she prevented herself from completely bonding with others. She had a family and a few close friends whom she loved, but we get the idea that she was never truly alive; she seems to have spent her life going through the motions of living. In the third stage of Offred’s development, Atwood uses two symbols, the natural world and the senses, to show how this once-ambivalent handmaid has finally become a part of humanity.
The first of these symbols could be described as "the natural or organic world," specifically the non-technological world to which the Republic of Gilead is trying to return. Images of plants and animals pervade this text, particularly images of flowers, and these are used for two main reasons: to reflect the sterility, barrenness, and isolation of Gilead and to contrast this with the sexuality, passion, and desire for social community of Offred. George Orwell uses a similar tactic in 1984 in the creation of the "Golden Country" which Winston Smith dreams about and finally realizes in the arms of Julia. As in Atwood's text, flowers symbolize a time and place full of life, passion, and unity:

The bluebells were so thick underfoot that it was impossible not to tread on them. [Winston] knelt down and began picking some, partly to pass the time away, but also from a vague idea that he would like to have a bunch of flowers to offer the girl when they met. (98)

Gilead, like Oceania, is a society in trouble, a place without life or abundance because technology has damaged the world of nature. A division now occurs. As Frank Davey tells us, "In Atwood’s writing images from technology are invariably associated with the time-fixing attempt to suppress or replace nature" (93). This attempt to suppress or replace nature, resulting in a lack of organic health and stability is reflected when Offred tells us:

I can't think of myself, my body, sometimes, without seeing a skeleton: how I must appear
to an electron. A cradle of life, made of bones; and within, hazards, warped proteins, bad crystals jagged as glass. Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault, nobody’s fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mold could touch. (143-144)

The natural world has indeed become denatured due to technology that backfired and this is demonstrated in Atwood’s use of flowers.

In her tale, Offred often tells us of the artificial plants or images of flowers and plants that are present in her environment, presumably because the real things are not available. The world of Gilead has, because of the detrimental effects of industry, disconnected itself from the natural world. In Offred’s room is a picture, “framed but with no glass: a print of flowers, blue irises, watercolor. Flowers are still allowed. Does each of us have the same print, the same chair, the same white curtains, I wonder? Government issue?” (10). An umbrella stand is said to have hooks “shaped like the opening fronds of a fern” (12); bunches of dried flowers over the marble mantelpiece are “just shadows” (20); stains on a mattress form the shapes of “dried flower petals. Not recent. Old love; there’s no other kind of love in this room now” (68); a bathroom is papered “in small blue flowers, forget-me-nots, with curtains to match” (81); a “dried flower arrangement” exists
on either end of the mantelpiece (102); rubbery radishes are “made into flowers, roses or tulips” (268). In a most-telling passage, Offred struggles not to associate the images of flowers with those of death and suffering that surround her. On a shopping trip, Offred sees the body of a man who has been killed as a criminal of the state. His blood has leaked onto a white sheet in the shape of a smile, and Offred tells us:

The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy’s garden. . . . The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers. . . . I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind. (44-45)

In each of these passages, then, the images of flowers, dying and used up, replace the actual blossoms. These images point to the lack of freedom, passion, and organic life in Gilead.

Sterility and lack of passion are not only associated with the physical surroundings in which Offred finds herself. The Commander’s wife is perhaps most strongly associated with dying or artificial plants, reflecting the physical and spiritual barrenness in the woman’s life. Her husband has found himself other sources of romantic and sexual satisfaction, and Serena Joy is associated with with three main plant or flower-related images of sterility. First of all, she is described as endlessly knitting scarves for soldiers at war, on which “fir trees march across the ends” (17). Offred comments that knitting these scarves is senseless and the only form of procreation left to Serena Joy. Secondly,
Serena Joy is constantly described as smelling, indeed stinking, of Lily of the Valley perfume which she has apparently gotten from the black market. The smell makes Offred “feel slightly ill, as if [she’s] in a closed car on a hot muggy day with an older woman wearing too much face powder” (103). Finally, Serena Joy diligently maintains a garden of flowers, but her purpose in doing so is unclear. Offred tells about observing the Commander’s wife in her garden one May day:

The tulips have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one, like teeth. One day I came upon Serena Joy, kneeling on a cushion in the garden, her cane beside her on the grass. She was snipping off the seedpods with a pair of shears . . . She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body? (195)

Living, healthy flowers have often been used to represent passion, sexuality, and reproduction in feminist literature, but in Serena Joy’s case, she has only the images, the scents, and the dying reminders of these plants. “Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreathe herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving,
you can't use them anymore, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants" (104-105).

The flowers associated with Offred herself, however, paint a dramatically different picture. These flowers and plants are ripe, healthy, reminding Offred of her life “before,” a life when she was part of a community, a family. She says, “I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers” (16-17). In one of her dreams, she says of the past, “Then we had the irises, rising beautiful and cool on their stalks . . . light blue, light mauve, and the darker ones, velvet and purple, black cat’s ears in the sun, indigo shadow, and the bleeding hearts, so female in shape it was a surprise they’d not long since been rooted out . . . heat rises, from the flowers themselves, you can feel it” (196). Offred also refers to her own “heaviness, as if [she’s] a melon on a stem, this liquid ripeness” (197). And finally, flowers remind Offred of the most dramatic example of the life and passion of her past that has been lost, the passion that gave life to her daughter. Seeing a lawn free of weeds, Offred is reminded of dandelions and she says:

Rings, we would make from them, and crowns and necklaces, stains from the bitter milk on our fingers. Or I’d hold one under her chin: Do you like butter? . . . I can see her, running across the lawn, the lawn there, just in front of me, at two, three, years old, waving one like a
sparkler, a small wand of white fire, the air filling with tiny parachutes. Blow, and you tell the time. All that time, blowing away in the summer breeze. It was daisies for love though, and we did that too. (275-276)

Just as images of flowers serve to remind Offred of her past life, flowers are also connected to the future, as many times, they are associated with Nick, the one person in Offred’s life who brings her true passion, and thus, genuine hope for a more complete life ahead. The first time we encounter Nick is when Offred sees him washing the Commander’s car. Offred reflects the lack of passion in her life when she says:

I walk along the gravel path that divides the back lawn, neatly, like a hair parting. It has rained during the night; the grass to either side is damp, the air humid. Here and there are worms, evidence of the fertility of the soil, caught by the sun, half dead; flexible and pink, like lips. . . . One of the Guardians assigned to our household is washing the car. . . . The car is a very expensive one. . . . It’s black, of course, the color of prestige or a hearse, and long and sleek. The driver is going over it with a chamois, lovingly. This at least hasn’t changed, the way men caress good cars. (23)
Returning from a shopping trip and walking along the sidewalk, Offred again finds Nick washing the car. She says, "The tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer wine cups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are after all, empty" (59). Later, when Offred sneaks into the sitting room of Serena Joy’s to steal "a magic flower" and not one from the dried arrangements that smells of Serena’s stale fumes, she and Nick first embrace. "What else comes from such denial? Without a word. Both of us shaking, how I’d like to. In Serena’s parlor, with the dried flowers, on the Chinese carpet, his thin body" (127). Offred’s passion for Nick continues to grow, and this passion is again reflected through flower imagery. Looking out her window, Offred says, "It’s Nick, I can see him now; he’s stepped off the path, onto the lawn, to breathe in the humid air which stinks of flowers, of pulpy growth, of pollen thrown into the wind in handfuls, like oyster spawn into the sea. All this prodigal breeding" (234-235). Nick apparently spends a lot of time walking on the lawn, for Offred tells us of another encounter, the allusion to Romeo and Juliet quite obvious. "The scent from the garden rises like heat from a body, there must be night blooming flowers, it’s so strong. . . . I can see the white oblong face of his. Nick. We look at each other. I have no rose to toss, he has no lute" (247-248). Since Offred so strongly associates flowers with the life-sustaining passion she shares with Nick, is it any wonder that she says, "I’ve tried to put some of the good things in [my story] as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?" (344). The past and passion that Nick and Offred are trying to
find are both symbolized by flowers and plants, symbolic of a natural order that struggles to exist in this unnatural world. This passion, even if it is only between two people, still represents a bond between human beings, a concern for others that did not occur before. In this society, where chemicals and religious fanatics have succeeded in turning the world around, making what was “natural” unnatural, such concern is desperately needed. Even though the authorities try to prevent passion and human love, it is ultimately these flowers and the life they represent that help bring Offred back into the world of the living because they take away her solitary way of thinking.

The final images that Atwood uses to reveal Offred’s growing desire to become an active part of her world revolve around the five senses. The leaders of Gilead wish to smother all but a select amount of sensory stimulation. Sights and sounds, especially if they are verbal in nature, are often muted or even eliminated for the citizens. Worse yet, many citizens have been made to fear the information their senses might bring to them, and so they have created sensory barricades for themselves. These conditions have forced the citizens of Gilead to live in secret, depending upon their other senses for communication, self-expression and survival. Offred uses these senses, when she can, to form connections with both her environment and people around her.

Vision, for those in Gilead, and especially for the handmaids, is of limited value in this society. First of all, physical barriers are constructed to limit vision. The costumes that the handmaids are forced to wear have large wings which limit what they can see. "The
white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen” (11). When Offred visits her doctor, she is covered with a sheet, of which she says, “I pull the second sheet, the cloth one, up over my body. At neck level there’s another sheet, suspended from the ceiling. It intersects me so the doctor will never see my face. He deals with a torso only” (78). And during the monthly “Ceremony,” the handmaids remain fully clothed as well. “My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher” (121).

Not only are there physical boundaries preventing clear and complete vision, there are also behavioral boundaries. When a black Eyes van passes Offred and a shopping companion on the street, Offred says, “When they pass, we avert our eyes. If there are sounds coming from inside, we try not to hear them. Nobody’s heart is perfect” (29). Later, when another van pulls up near Offred and Ofglen while they are shopping, Ofglen warns, “Keep moving . . . pretend not to see” (219). At a Salvaging, in which the handmaids actively participate in the executions of four men and women, Offred says, “I have seen the kicking feet and the two in black who now seize hold of them and drag downward with all their weight. I don’t want to see it anymore. I look at the grass instead. I describe the rope” (355).

Offred’s world is a world of images, mainly because almost all forms of verbal stimuli have been restricted or removed. Offred does recognize the importance of images in her life when she says that she wished she would have memorized Luke, “paid more attention, to the details, the moles and scars, the singular creases; I didn’t and he’s
fading. Day by day, night by night he recedes, and I become more faithless” (346). Ultimately, however, Offred finds this image-oriented world lacking and disturbing. “What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. . . . Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be” (185).

The few times Offred has the opportunity to clearly see and thus connect with her world, the results are quite unsettling. For example, on a shopping trip, Offred and Ofglen view the results of a recent execution:

We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn’t matter if we look. We’re supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they’ll be there for days, until there’s a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them. (42)

Another example, previously described, occurs when Offred is at Jezebel’s and looks closely at herself in a mirror, saying, “I am a wreck . . . I am a travesty, in bad make-up and someone else’s clothes; used glitz” (329-330). Even these disturbing visions, however, cannot completely stifle Offred’s adventurous spirit.

Thus in Gilead, where language has been essentially eliminated, citizens are forced to “see the world in gasps” (40) and deal in images
around them. Because of the nature of these images, or the dangers involved in seeing accurately, people have altered their behavior, limiting their vision voluntarily when it hasn’t been limited for them. Additionally, auditory speech has been distorted or eliminated in Gilead, either by the regime or by the citizens themselves. For example, Offred longs to communicate with the Marthas, but she can only listen at doors for information where the sounds are often muffled (13); handmaids pretend not to hear what sounds come out of the black Eye vans (29); the Soul Scrolls are machines that verbally broadcast prayers that have been requested, but from the outside, where the handmaids are, “You can’t hear the voices from the outside; only a murmur, a hum, like a devout crowd, on its knees” (216); Aunt Lydia speaks on a PA system at a Salvaging and “there is an instant and earsplitting feedback whine from the PA system” (353). Finally, the soundtracks of “feminist” films are removed before they are shown to the handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Centers, limiting what they can hear to non-verbal sounds:

They don’t play the soundtrack, on movies like these, even though they do on the porno films. They want us to hear the screams and grunts and shrieks of what is supposed to be either extreme pain or extreme pleasure or both at once, but they don’t want us to hear what the Unwomen are saying. (153)
As a result of this elimination of human speech, numerous non-linguistic sounds invade the world of Offred, and she is in tune to them. Offred mentions, for example, bells that measure time (10), heavy steps and soft taps of canes (12), whistles (24), a baby's cry (83), audible sighs (86), a cat's mewing (96), the sounds of shots (97), sleigh bells (97), a clock ticking (101), a finger making a hum around the top of a glass (131), soft chanting (159), crashes (193) and earsplitting thunder (274). For the most part, these sounds don't seem to play a dramatic role in Offred's life. However, she is a woman starved for sensory stimulation, so very little in this woman's life goes by unnoticed. She is no longer ignoring the world around her as she did in her the life "before."

Thus, the citizens of Gilead have had much of their verbal information limited through public censorship, and what is left has been subject to personal censorship. Interestingly, this deprivation has not taken place with the other senses of smell, touch, and taste. In fact, it is these senses that Offred seems to grab on to and use the most in her daily life. Readers get a long list, for example, of the smells that Offred either experiences or remembers, including chewing gum and perfume (3), lemon furniture polish (9), bread (12), coffee (13), nail polish (39), old smoke, after-shave, tobacco dust (79), damp earth (96), Lily of the Valley perfume (126), mothballs (122), earth and grass (142), shaving lotion (181), vegetable oil (204), and warm tar (361).
Just as in real life, smells trigger important and sometimes unwanted memories. These memories remind Offred of her past life as a daughter, mother, and wife:

The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It reminds me of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother. This is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out (62).

When smelling Serena Joy’s Lily of the Valley, Offred says, “I should appreciate it. It’s the scent of pubescent girls, of the gifts young children used to give their mothers, for Mother’s Day; the smell of white cotton socks and white cotton petticoats, of dusting powder, of the innocence of female flesh not yet given over to hairiness and blood” (103). Offred also recalls waiting for secret meetings with Luke before they were married, dabbing her ears with Opium perfume (67).

Offred’s most painful smell-related memory occurs while she is taking a bath and she remembers giving her daughter baths. “It must be the smell of the soap. I put my face against the soft hair at the back of her neck and breathe her in, baby powder and child’s washed flesh and shampoo, with an undertone, the faint scent of urine” (82).

It is significant, also, that virtually every major character in this novel is connected with a scent of some sort. Serena Joy is said to reek of Lily of the Valley perfume. The Commander uses a particular
shaving lotion that smells like moth balls. Offred herself smells of butter, vegetable oil, or Opium. Luke, who’s fate is unknown by Offred, is thought to have “the smell of a cooped-up animal in a dirty cage” (134). Some of the handmaids just smell from lack of bathing, according to one wife. “Some of them, why, they aren’t even clean. And won’t give you a smile, mope in their rooms, don’t wash their hair, the smell” (147). Offred’s daughter smells of shampoo and urine. Janine, the only woman who actually gives birth during the course of the present action of the novel and who also retains her own name, possesses “the smell of dens, of inhabited caves, the smell of the plaid blanket on the bed when the cat gave birth on it, once, before she was spayed. Smell of matrix” (158). Offred’s previous commander is hardly described, other than the fact that he “smelled like a church cloakroom in the rain; like your mouth when the dentist starts picking at your teeth; like a nostril” (122).

Just as Offred’s sense of smell is a key way by which she interacts with her world, so is her sense of taste. We again get long lists of foods, most of which are bland and don’t excite Offred in any significant way. In fact, there are many times throughout the novel that she has trouble eating real food. “I’m not hungry tonight. I feel sick to my stomach” (86); “the dinner is beef stew. I have some trouble finishing it” (175); “in each of our baskets are strawberries—the strawberries are in season now, so we’ll eat them and eat them until we’re sick of them” (212).
More importantly, however, what Offred truly hungers for is rarely food. She hungers for “off limit” substances like cigarettes, alcohol, and coffee, but these are forbidden to her. She hungers for information, saying, “I am ravenous for news, any kind of news; even if it’s false news, it must mean something” (26). She hungers for the freedom she sees expressed by the Japanese tourists, saying, “The smell of nail polish has made me hungry” (39). She hungers for language, describing the counters in a Scrabble game as being like candies, “made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would also taste of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious” (180). Another time, when the Commander lets her read old fashion magazines, Offred says, “On these occasions I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. If I were eating, it would be the gluttony of the famished; if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere” (238-239). And finally, she hungers for life, for after the Salvaging, she says:

I’m also hungry. This is monstrous, but nevertheless it’s true. Death makes me hungry. Maybe it’s because I’ve been emptied; or maybe it’s the body’s way of seeing to it that I remain alive. . . . I want to go to bed, make love, right now. I think of the word relish. I could eat a horse. (361)
These last two passages are especially interesting because of the way Atwood connects taste and hunger imagery with passion. The importance of these sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches comes from the significance they play in Offred’s struggle to continue living a life filled with passion. A perfect example of Offred’s tendency to describe passion according to the senses deals with Nick. Nick is associated with each of the four senses thus far described; we remember him from his “cap tilted at a jaunty angle” which tells Offred if she is to see the Commander (sight); his whistle (sound); Offred thinks of how Nick might smell, longing to smell his “tanned skin, moist in the sun, filmed with smoke” (24). Offred also says that Nick makes her hungry. “I want to reach up, taste his skin, he makes me hungry,” (127) and “we look at each other. I have no rose to toss, he has no lute. But it’s the same kind of hunger” (248).

It is perhaps the final sense, the sense of touch, that Offred values and uses the most. Touching means physically connecting with another human being. In some cases of Offred’s story, however, the sense of touch has become dangerous or degrading, stripped of its compassion, of its humanity, such as when the doctor probes and gropes at Offred during her monthly examination. After proposing that he impregnate Offred and having his services turned down, “He takes his hand away, lazily almost, lingeringly, this is not the last word for him as far as he’s concerned” (80). When the Commander asks Offred to kiss him after an illicit night of Scrabble playing, he has to request, “Not like that... as if you meant it” (181). The Commander endangers
Offred when, during the second Ceremony, he reaches up to touch her face. Offred says, “Don’t do that again . . . try to touch me like that . . . You could get me transferred” (209). When Offred relates to us the story of how she lost her job and independence in the time before Gilead, she tells us that “I wandered through the house, from room to room. I remember touching things, not even consciously, just placing my fingers on them” (229). But it is at the end of the novel that touch is the most horribly abused, when Offred and other handmaids like her must participate in a Salvaging, in which they themselves hold the ropes that hang three women. Further, they use their own hands to execute a man accused of raping and murdering a pregnant handmaid. Offred is not totally immune to what is going on around her. After hearing the crime that has been committed, she says:

A sigh goes up from us; despite myself I feel my hands clench. It is too much, this violation. The baby too, after what we go through. It’s true, there is a bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend . . . I try to look inside of him, inside his trashed face, see what he must really look like. I think he’s about thirty. It isn’t Luke. But it could have been, I know that. I know whatever he’s done I can’t touch him. (358-359)

In these instances, then, touch represents the horrible—oppression, hatred, anger, lust, danger, betrayal, fear. It is these associations that Offred struggles against.
Luckily, for every touch lacking in humanity, there are several more that are positive and healthy that give Offred strength to live in Gilead, that make her feel a part of something. Enjoying a taste of freedom while playing Scrabble, she says, “I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it” (180). Touch represents solidarity or community amongst the citizens of Gilead. Offred and the other handmaids reach across their beds and touch each other’s hands when the Aunts aren’t looking (4). When the handmaids first see a very pregnant Janine, their fingers “itch to touch her. She’s a magic presence” (35). Offred and Ofglen put their hands over their hearts and feel stabs of pain when they see the funeral procession led by the Econowives (59). Offred and Moira touch fingers through a hole in the bathroom as a sign of their friendship (116). The handmaids rub oil on Janine’s stomach as she prepares to give birth (150). Cora, afraid that Offred has committed suicide, puts her hand on Offred’s back after she finds her asleep on the floor (193). Offred even “connects” with herself, saving butter to make her skin soft, telling herself, “As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire” (125).

Many of these touches, then, represent a life of connection that Offred longs for. When Offred sees Rita making bread, she longs to help. “I would help Rita make the bread, sinking my hands into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh. I hunger to touch
something, other than cloth or wool. I hunger to commit the act of touch” (14). After seeing the way Nick caresses the Commander’s car, the one person whom Offred is most hungry to touch, of course, is Nick, and she does plenty of that. Their first physical contact comes during the gathering before the Ceremony, when he touches her foot with his shoe, and she feels her shoe “soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin” (104). The touching between Offred and Nick, of course, grows more intimate, even before it is sanctioned by the Commander’s wife. They meet in the parlour, where Offred feels that it is good to be touched, “to be felt so greedily, to feel so greedy” (128). It is in Nick’s touch that they finally consummate their relationship, possibly producing a child that will finally provide the source of joy, the hope for a better future, that Offred has been seeking all along.

Because of the limited use and accessibility of written and verbal communication, citizens of Gilead are forced to rely on other abilities to communicate and experience the worlds around them. The use of the senses is not exclusively feminine, but it does reflect a strong desire to directly connect with the natural world, a world that precludes language and is not bound to technology and mechanization. In using her senses, Offred finally begins to establish bonds between herself and the environment she used to ignore, the people she used to dismiss. Perhaps the biggest irony of all is that in removing and censoring language and technology, this theocracy has created the potential for a sensually oriented society, a society that reaches out to see, hear, smell, taste and touch when it seems safe. Many of the
people of Gilead, and especially Offred, have moved from being solitary souls, each fearful of punishment and retribution, to being joined and defiant against the regime that threatens to destroy their very senses of humanity.

In this examination of some of the feminist concerns of Atwood's text, many of the symbols of feminist literature are at work, exploring the issues of power, oppression, sexuality, motherhood, self identity, the natural world, and spirituality that are key components of the feminist tradition. These images, when viewed collectively, show us the life of a woman who, inch by inch, has joined her world. For Offred, the journey has been painful, dangerous and frustrating, but ultimately, it has given her back her life.

This brief analysis of these feminist concerns reveals Atwood's thought-provoking commentary on both Gileadean society and our own. As Professor Pieixoto says in his presentation at the end of the novel, "There was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis" (389). Atwood's text possesses a genius of its own in its synthesis of literary tradition, historical fact, political perspective, and insightful speculation about the present and the future.
CHAPTER III. LANGUAGE AND THE HANDMAID'S TALE:

Language and its Influences on
Power, Memory, and Community

Until now, the uses of language in *The Handmaid's Tale* haven't been thoroughly discussed in this thesis, but this is not to suggest that language is somehow unimportant to or distinct from the utopian, dystopian, and feminist issues that have thus far been presented. It is obvious in reading this text that Margaret Atwood's vocation as a poet has made her especially sensitive to the many uses and misuses of language in our society as well as in the Republic of Gilead. In the novel, Atwood demonstrates that the manipulation of language is a vital prerequisite for the achievement of power, both public and private, and that once this power has been achieved, virtually every important characteristic of the human condition--memory, self expression, self identity, community, and freedom--faces the possibility of irreparable damage. But she also shows the positive and enriching uses of language in the lives of these people, the ways that language restores memory and a sense of community. Ultimately, in reading Atwood's text, we begin to see that we cannot separate language from power since language is often a tool of power used to oppress and to silence. Nor can we separate language from memory since it is with language that we acknowledge our memories and share them with others. And finally, we cannot distinguish language from society since the moment people cease to communicate in some fashion,
to share their histories and hopes for the future, isolation has replaced any sense of solidarity.

Gilead is a society that has, for the most part, eliminated the options of reading and writing for its citizens. All reading materials and movies have been destroyed, beginning with newspapers that at first were censored but now have been eliminated completely. Publishing collectives, such as the one Moira worked for, have been closed down. Hospital records were burned once they yielded who had given abortions in pre-Gilead society. In the Rachel and Leah centers, the handmaids listen to tapes of prayers so that even the Aunts won’t be guilty of “the sin of reading,” (114) although the Aunts can read and write on special occasions such as Salvagings. Generally, the only way for people of this society, especially women, to get information is by watching television or through highly dangerous networks or “grapevines.” Although Offred feels that “any news, now, is better than none,” (105) it is understood that the news available through the media is highly censored. “They only show us victories, never defeats. . . . [The male newscaster] tells us what we long to believe. He’s very convincing” (106). Even the Bible, the one text that would be thought to be acceptable reading material, is locked away, taken out only on nights of the Ceremony and read only by the Commander. “We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read” (112). Just as in 1984, then, free access to reading and writing, to learning and expressing, is considered highly dangerous to the maintenance of this theocratic society.
Even the most innocuous uses of language in Gilead have been eliminated because of their perceived danger. For example, public signs and billboards have been replaced by images and icons; these are considered more safe than actual words. Red hexagons mean stop (27); a huge golden lily is the sign for the Lilies of the Field shop (33); the Milk and Honey store has a sign with three eggs, a bee, and a cow (34); a pork chop sign directs shoppers to the entrance of All Flesh (36); a fish with a smile and eyelashes is painted on a sign for the Loaves and Fishes store (212).

More emotional and controversial signs appear in the place of language, however, as when Offred sees that the body of a former doctor who has been executed has “a placard hung around his neck to show why he has been executed: a drawing of a human fetus” (43). Furthermore, those caught in homosexual acts bear purple placards around their necks to indicate their “Gender Treachery” (57); a former priest who has been executed wears a placard with an upside-down cross. Another man wears a red “J,” but this rare verbal symbol has become yet another image to Offred because its meaning is confused. Offred questions, “So the J isn’t for Jew. What could it be? Jehovah’s Witness? Jesuit? Whatever it meant, he’s just as dead” (260). The bodies of the handmaids themselves are not immune to the policy of assigning images to represent places or people. “I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape” (84-85).
In the few cases when the society has allowed written language to be viewed, the language functions as propaganda, furthering the messages already drilled into the minds of the handmaids. Large banners proclaim “Women’s Prayvaganza Today” and “God Is a National Resource” (276-277). Offred has a pillow in her room with the word “faith” on it, and while the message was probably intended to encourage Offred to have faith in God and the wishes of the Republic, what Offred struggles to have faith in is a future of freedom and “hope” like that which she sees written on a tombstone in town (135). The Soul Scrolls spit out prayers that have been requested by commanders’ wives, but their printouts cannot be clearly read because they are immediately recycled, nor can their “toneless metallic voices” (216) be clearly heard. In the indoctrination center, Offred watches a film with no soundtrack in which the signs, “TAKE BACK THE NIGHT, FREEDOM TO CHOOSE, EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY, RECAPTURE OUR BODIES, and DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN’S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE” (154) are clearly visible, but Offred suggests that rather than being overlooked, these signs were provided “to remind us of the old days of no safety” (154) and to remind the handmaids of the destructive behaviors of the selfish women who came before them that have led to the current emergency measures for creating children. Interestingly, mixed in with these signs is a line drawing of a “woman’s body, lying on a table, blood dripping out of it” (154) which foreshadows the images on Gilead’s placards for doctors guilty of committing abortions. In another film, the handmaid also remembers witnessing
manufacturers of sexy lingerie who must wear paper hats with the word “Shame” printed in red (299). This again reminds us of Hester Prynne's scarlet "A," the symbol she must wear to remind herself and others of the adultery, the crime against the state that she has committed. In each of these cases, the language that appears seems hardly by accident. Knowing that the handmaids are desperate for any written or verbal information, leaders of this society have turned this to their advantage, knowing that their propaganda will be devoured greedily by its citizens.

More disturbing than the removal of written language from Gilead, though, is the way that private conversation has been censored by the individual speakers. The state has definite ideas about where and when speech should be allowed, and the women follow these rules out of fear. The Aunts warn “the girls” that they shouldn’t speak to the Commanders’ wives unless they have been asked direct questions, and the Commander’s wife doesn’t speak to Offred unless she can’t avoid doing so (17-19); the Commander’s wife also tells Offred not to call her ma’am because Offred isn’t “a Martha” (21); the guardians, like Nick, and the doctors aren’t supposed to speak to the handmaids casually, so when Nick makes a harmless comment like, “Nice walk,” (60) Offred is nervous. The handmaids can only speak to each other responses suitable to their positions as surrogates, such as, “Blessed be the fruit,” (25) “May the Lord open,” (25) “Under his Eye,” (59) and “Praise be” (364). In addition, they are forced to recite, three times a day, the
Republic's creed: "From each according to her ability; to each according to his need" (151).

Many of the handmaids have internalized these rules of conversation, censoring their own speech for safety's sake. When a new handmaid appears to go shopping, Offred wants to question where the old handmaid went but says, "It isn't the sort of thing you ask questions about, because the answers are not usually the answers you want to know" (26). While the women are in public shopping, "nobody talks much, though there is a rustling, and the women's heads move from side to side: here, shopping, is where you might see someone you've known in the time before" (34). Later, when Offred questions Rita about the previous Offred, the woman ignores the question. Offred comments, "I am like a child here, there are some things I must not be told" (70). And finally, when the doctor examining Offred mentions the word "sterile," Offred almost gasps because the doctor has "said a forbidden word. Sterile" (79). Even Offred, who we hope will rebel against this oppressive society, seems controlled at times by her fear of retribution if she breaks a rule in Gilead.

Even the absence of speech, or silence, is scrutinized and censored by the state. When questioned by an Interpreter (and probably an Eye) whether or not she is happy, Offred knows that it is sometimes "as dangerous not to speak" as to speak and murmurs, "Yes, we are very happy. . . . I have to say something. What else can I say?" (39). Later, Offred recalls of Testifying, "It's safer to make things up than to say you have nothing to reveal" (92). At the Jezebel club,
Offred knows she must keep her mouth shut and look stupid which “shouldn’t be that hard” (306). Just as Offred is beginning to be more aware of the power of spoken language, she is realizing the significance of the private and unspoken thought. Both of these revelations make Offred hunger for language even more.

Luckily, there are some significant examples of language that have “slipped through” the rules of the system, and Offred, a woman deprived of opportunities to read and communicate, grasps at these. The most dramatic example occurs when Offred finds a message on the floor of her cupboard, presumably written by a former handmaid, “in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell: Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (69). Even though Offred doesn’t know what this means, she says, “It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I’m communing with her, this unknown woman” (69). Throughout this novel, the message becomes a letter, a prayer, and an incantation for Offred. She repeats it often to inspire her and give her strength. It isn’t until later that the Commander tells Offred that this message means, roughly, “Don’t let the bastards wear you down,” and this makes the words even more sacred to Offred, a woman being worn down by this society. They give her hope that others have existed who resisted the policies of Gilead.

The Commander, ironically enough, is perhaps most responsible for providing Offred with language, showing us that those in high places can often manipulate the very rules and laws they themselves
helped create. Once again, Gileadean society is not so different from our own. During their clandestine meetings, in which Offred is welcomed into the Commander’s office that is filled with books, certain rules are broken by both parties. When Offred is in the Commander’s office, she wants most to talk with the Commander about what is going on. “I can feel speech backing up inside me, it’s so long since I have really talked with anyone. The terse, whispered exchange with Ofglen, on our walk today, hardly counts; but it was a tease. . . . I want more” (239). Offred is able to find access to language through her relationship with the Commander, a man whose office is “an oasis of the forbidden” (177) filled with books; who lets her play Scrabble, her tongue “thick with the effort of spelling” (199); who lets her read magazines and books and listen to “a minute or two of Radio Free America, to show me he can” (271). He even lets her write, the pen feeling sensuous in her hand.

Obviously, then, the lack of language and freedom of expression have enabled the Republic of Gilead to set up, and maintain, shop. People are terrified to communicate openly or even communicate honestly with themselves. What is even more disturbing is how this society has distorted language to achieve its dehumanizing goals. Throughout the text are examples of words used to objectify and reduce what is being described so that emotion, guilt, and responsibility are removed from the situations. When Aunt Lydia is discussing how women behaved in the past, she cannot bring herself to describe these “sinful” behaviors specifically. “Things, the word she
used when whatever it stood for was so distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass her lips" (72). During one of their meetings, the Commander calls Offred “fair little one,” and asks her if she is up for a “little excitement,” causing Offred to think, “I notice that everything tonight is little. He wishes to diminish things, myself included” (297). While this behavior could be expected from those in charge, it is disturbing that even Offred herself is capable of objectifying her reality, of removing the emotion from potentially devastating situations. For example, when Offred reflects on her plans for escape with Luke, she remembers that her cat needed to be killed in order for the escape to be successful. What most strikes Offred is when Luke says, “I’ll take care of it,” prompting Offred to say, “I knew he meant kill. . . . You have to create an it, where none was before. You do that first, in your head, and then you make it real” (249). The man who has been accused of raping a woman and killing her unborn child at the Salvaging has also “become an it” (360) to be slaughtered by the handmaids. Further, women who will not bear children for the state and who ultimately die horrible deaths for it are declared “Unwomen” and dead babies are called “Unbabies” (144) or “shredders” (278). All of these uses of language are directly implicated in how people think in this society. If they are able to think of each other (especially women) as inhuman, as “things” and “its” and “Un’s,” they are able to use and abuse them with no guilt or remorse. This is perhaps the most terrifying, and powerful, use of language in this society.
The strongest example of this dehumanizing use of language exists in how people are labeled and how they refer to themselves in this society. Handmaids are not called by their “former” names. Rather, a handmaid’s title is a composite of the possessive preposition “of” and the first name of her current commander or owner (Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren), making her a mere possession, a nameless “missing person” (132). Not knowing Offred’s name makes her an “everywoman”; what happens to her could happen to any one of us. The role of names in Gilead presents a contrast to how names are assigned in some of the feminist and open-ended utopias that have previously been discussed. In these books, children may be given temporary names at birth, but their official names come from other sources. In Ata, people’s true names come to them from their dreams. In the Wanderground, Herland and Mattapoisett, children name themselves based on some specific characteristic or experience that is significant for them. There are no surnames; first names are earned in these cultures. Names play a vital role in all of these cultures, including Gilead, for they influence how people look at themselves. In Ata, the Wanderground, Herland, and Mattapoisett, the name is a possession of the citizen; the name is something about the person of which he/she can be proud. In Gilead, however, Offred’s name, and the pride and self-identity that it represents, has been stripped away. Rather than her name being her possession, it indicates that she is a possession of Fred. It shouldn’t surprise us, then, when Offred tells us, “I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways
that I am not. I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me” (126).

It seems that everything in Atwood’s text serves a dual purpose. Sexuality demonstrates both power and weakness; motherhood, maternal nurturing and rejection; journeys demonstrate movement and entrapment; mirrors, discovery and distortion; flowers represent life and sterility, the senses, gratification and denial. Thus, it isn’t surprising that language should also serve more than one purpose in Gileadean society. Even though this theocracy has taken all possible steps to control and even eliminate language, there are still many examples of how it is used in positive, albeit covert ways: to remind Offred of her past, and to establish alliances in her present.

The issues of the past, of memory, of history, are vitally important to modern dystopic fiction including George Orwell’s 1984 and Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale. Once again, however, the past is dealt with quite differently by the two texts. Whereas Gilead has eliminated virtually all records of the past other than those rare exceptions that aid in propaganda, Oceania takes a much more ruthless stance about the past, especially written records that could endanger the state’s domination. Rather than elimination, Oceania has instead allowed these records to remain, revising them, and in essence, rewriting history, to serve the goals of Big Brother. Winston Smith works in, ironically, the Ministry of Truth where his job is to rewrite, or “rectify” in the terms of the Party, old newspaper articles so that all
accounts, both past and present, are acceptable. For example, on one occasion, Winston has to rewrite an account of a speech after Big Brother had made a miscalculation to make it appear that Big Brother had accurately predicted where the Eurasian Higher Command would attack (35). As Orwell writes:

This process of continuous alteration was applied not only to newspapers, but to books, periodicals, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, films, sound tracks, cartoons, photographs -- to every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance. Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date. (36)

Because both Oceania and Gilead are communities in transition, it makes sense that memories from the past would invade the lives of the present. The past, however, needs to be highly controlled and manipulated if these oppressive societies are to survive. O’Brien, the spokesman for Oceania’s Party mentality says, “We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?” (205). As Atwood and Orwell demonstrate, though, the “Party” and the “Republic” can only do so much. It can control public record through manipulation of language, but there will always be private reflections and perceptions that, to some degree, will survive, and language, the language of thoughts and memories, is one tool that Atwood’s handmaid uses to survive.
Offred remembers the time when newspapers were available, when Bibles were in every motel room and magazines in dentists' offices were carelessly read, when a woman like Serena Joy could lecture on television that a woman's place should be in the home. But individual words and phrases are also of great significance to Offred because just a word or two can establish a connection with the past in Offred's mind. Sometimes these words serve simply as reminders of what once existed in her life. They don't hold a great deal of personal significance for Offred. For example, the blanket she has in the Rachel and Leah center still says, "U.S.," (4) reminding her that Gilead didn't always exist. "Jimmies" is the term Offred struggles to remember for chocolate sprinkles that could be found on ice cream cones (213). The term "network" that Ofglen uses to describe the May Day movement reminds Offred of "networking, one of my mother's old phrases, musty slang of yesteryear. Even in her sixties she still did something she called that, though as far as I could see all it meant was having lunch with some other woman" (261-262). When Offred sees Janine's pregnant belly, she calls it *humungous*, a "word from my childhood" (36). Hearing Ofglen mention "May Day" takes Offred back to high school where she studied wars (58). Preparing for her bath reminds Offred of the term crotch rot that Moira would say, a term that has since been replaced by Aunt Lydia's "unhygienic" (82). Offred's new relationship with the Commander reminds her of the term "outside woman, they used to be called" (210). And finally, on her way to a secret meeting with Nick in his apartment, she remembers from her
past, “separate entrance, it would say in the ads, and that meant you could have sex, unobserved” (337). Each of these phrases provides a connection to the past that Offred longs for.

There are terms that do more than simply remind, however. They serve to demonstrate the striking changes that have occurred in the Republic of Gilead for Offred and the rest of its citizens. The word fraternize reminds Offred of Luke because he once explained the term to her (15), and reflecting on this term, Offred more clearly realizes that people in this society can no longer form alliances or loving relationships like that which she shared with her husband. When she first goes to the Commander’s office, his utterances of “hello,” “you must find this strange,” and “go home,” and his “sheepish” appearance all serve to remind Offred of words and images she hasn’t encountered “for a long time, for years. Under the circumstances [they] seem out of place, comical even, a flip backward in time” (177). These phrases demonstrate to Offred how distorted the sexual and romantic relationships have become in Gilead, relationships that must take place either in the direct presence of the commanders’ wives or else in secret. Seeing the Japanese tourists who have been “westernized,” Offred remembers, “I used to dress like that. That was freedom” (38). Initials like “J.H. loves B.P. 1954” carved into a desk top at the Rachel and Leah Center also take Offred into the past. “These seem to me like the inscriptions I used to read about, carved on the stone walls of caves, or drawn with a mixture of soot and animal fat. . . . These habits of former times appear to me now lavish, decadent almost: immoral,
like the orgies of barbarian regimes" (145). These harmless expressions of love demonstrate to Offred that neither love nor honest expression is harmless in Gilead. When the Commander wishes to take Offred "out," she reflects on her complete lack of freedom, thinking, "It's an archaic phrase. Surely there is nowhere, anymore, where a man can take a woman, out" (299). During the encounter between Nick and Offred, Nick's comment of "no romance" reminds Offred that "that would have meant something else, once. Once it would have meant: no strings. Now it means: no heroics. It means: don't risk yourself for me, if it should come to that" (340) When the Commander chastises Offred for believing in the foolish concept of romantic love, Offred says:

Falling in love, we said; I feel for him. We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion: so lovely, like flying, and yet at the same time so dire, so extreme, so unlikely. God is love, they once said, but we reversed that, and love, like heaven, was just around the corner. (292)

These terms that Offred remembers and reflects upon are significant because they clearly point out the changes that have occurred in her life. By focusing on key words or phrases that she encounters or remembers from her past life, Offred realizes that everything that has ever mattered to her, her freedom to love, have sex, dress, travel, and feel the way she wants to have been taken away from her. Even though these are excruciating experiences, they are
still positive because in providing a connection between Offred and her past, they prevent her from becoming complacent and accepting her current status like some other "believers" have done. These slivers from her past may hurt her, they may anger her, they may frustrate her, but they never let her forget what once was, and they never let her stop hoping for what could be. Further, Offred's language, like her senses and her perceptions of the natural world, allow her to reestablish connections with those whom she has come to love.

For all of pain that language brings Offred, the fear and the frustration, there is one important way that language brings happiness into Offred's life. Just as Offred hungers to commit the act of touch, she is also ravenous for language and uses verbal communication to establish community and connection with other people. Granted these relationships must exist in secret, but they still exist, allowing Offred to create alliances with those around her. Unlike Orwell's 1984, in which bonds between members of society are very few, there are several communities which exist in Gilead, some of these communities positive and some negative.

One of the most obvious communities created by the Gileadean regime is the community of handmaids, women oppressed and stripped of their freedom. Early on in the novel, we learn how important it is for these women to be able to communicate. In the Rachel and Leah Center, they are not allowed to talk to each other or to the Angels, the guards who patrol the grounds. And yet, the most striking images we have of the "RED" Centers (as the handmaids have labeled them) occur
when the women reach across their army-issue cots, touch hands and whisper to each other. "We learned to lip read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed. Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (4-5). Names are very important, and while Offred wants to tell her name to others, such as on Birth Days, we never learn her name specifically. David Ketterer argues that it is likely that Offred could be the June mentioned above, a name signifying love and marriage, as every other name mentioned is assumed by a character in her tale (214). Regardless, it is through this combination of touch and speech that the original bonds are established between these nameless women. Throughout the text, information is exchanged through this network; Offred hears the rumors "passed on to me in soundless words, the lips hardly moving" (213) on shopping trips, Birth Days, Salvagings, and Prayvaganzas.

Ofglen, Offred's shopping partner, is one handmaid to whom Offred feels particularly close. The two women begin their relationship cautious of each other, each other's spy. Gradually, however, the two women realize that they can depend on each other. It is Ofglen who gives Offred her first breath of hope when she tells Offred of the resistance, of an "us" which Offred can join. She also takes Offred into her confidence, establishing a clear bond when she shares the secret password "May Day" with Offred, and in doing so, creates the possibility for her own demise. Ofglen commits suicide at the end of the novel, ironically to silence herself and thus protect Offred, causing
the living handmaid to say, “So she’s dead, and I am here safe, after all. She did it before they came. I feel a great relief. I feel thankful to her. She died that I may live. I will mourn later” (367). Unfortunately, Offred never learns Ofglen’s real name, and Ofglen is not only physically dead, she is “lost in a sea of names” (363).

Offred has perhaps her strongest connections not with living handmaids but with a dead one. The former handmaid who communicates to Offred only through a message etched in a cupboard is a constant companion of Offred’s, “an unknown woman with the face of Moira” (117). What the handmaid is supposed to be communicating with Offred is unclear. “I trace the tiny scratched writing with the ends of my fingers, as if it’s a code in Braille. It sounds in my head now less like a prayer, more like a command: but to do what?” (190). Finally, it is the spirit of this dead handmaid who Offred feels has accompanied her all along. “How could I have believed I was alone in here? There were always two of us” (375).

It has been Moira, however, who has been Offred’s single closest friend, and this friendship has also been enhanced by past experience and present conversations, both in the Rachel and Leah Center and at Jezebel’s. When times were at their roughest, the two women worked to get together to communicate, such as in the re-education center when Offred and Moira would sneak to the bathroom and make lewd suggestions about the relationship between Aunt Lydia and Janine. Offred reflects on the importance of “talk like that”: 
There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There's something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It's like a spell of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with. In the pain of the washroom cubicle someone unknown had scratched: Aunt Lydia sucks. It was like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion. (287-288)

When Moira and Offred next meet at Jezebel's, they immediately go to the nearest bathroom to catch up, and this is when Moira tells Offred of her attempted escape, subsequent capture in Maine, and instatement at the club. Moira has herself become a part of yet another community of oppressed women, the women of the club who the Aunts have given up on and none of whom are “too fond of men” (325). Offred, too, is invited into this community by a woman who shakes her hand and says welcome (315), again demonstrating that words and touch can create a sense of community almost anywhere.

Offred longs to establish contact with other oppressed women such as Rita and Cora, the Marthas, and this contact would also come through conversation. Occasionally Cora will give Offred “a smile that includes,” (174) or will demonstrate her alliance with Offred by offering to lie about a wasted breakfast (195), but for the most part, these relationships are discouraged, and there is a great deal of fear
and mistrust between the women due to their lack of communication. Despite this, Offred longs for the time when open communication was as much a part of life as preparing the daily supper. Perhaps seeing Rita and Cora as surrogate mothers to replace her own missing mother, Offred tells us:

> Today, despite Rita’s closed face and pressed lips, I would like to stay here, in the kitchen. . . . We would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get into. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other’s voices, signaling that yes, we know all about it. . . . I know what you mean, we’d say. Or a quaint expression you sometimes hear, still, from older people, I hear where you’re coming from, as if the voice itself were a traveler. . . . How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange of sorts. (13-14)

An interesting feature of this novel is the way that enemies form alliances as well. As Offred says, “This is something you can depend upon: there will always be alliances, of one kind or another” (166). The Commander’s wife seems to have only abject hatred for Offred and Offred longs, at first, to turn the Commander’s wife into “an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me. . . .
But I could see already that I wouldn’t have liked her, nor her me” (21). Still, Serena Joy is not without occasional kindnesses, such as giving Offred a cigarette, letting her see a picture of her daughter, and letting the household watch the news, and thus gain access to language, on the nights of the Ceremony. Just as the ceremony is a ritual, so too is the unspoken rule in which “we always get here on time, he’s always late, Serena always lets us watch the news” (105). When Serena Joy discusses the possibility of having Nick help out in getting Offred pregnant, Offred tells us, “For this moment at least we are cronies, this could be a kitchen table, it could be a date we’re discussing, some girlish stratagem of ploys and flirtation” (265).

Not to be outdone by his wife, the Commander also tries to establish a secret alliance with Offred, and he too uses language to his advantage. Offred has no choice in going to the Commander's office when first summoned, but it is with language that he keeps her interested in coming back. It is in the Commander’s office that she plays scrabble, writes with a pen, reads magazines and books, listens to Radio Free America and most importantly, engages in (almost) unlimited conversation. Offred however is well aware of what is going on, telling us of one such exchange, “Staring at the magazine, as he dangled it before me like fish bait, I wanted it. I wanted it with a force that made the ends of my fingers ache. At the same time I saw this longing of mine as trivial and absurd, because I’d taken such magazines lightly enough once” (200). Since the previous Offred knew of the Latin joke, “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum,” which she apparently
got from similar nighttime excursions to the Commander's office, it appears that this is a pattern of manipulation for the man.

Offred's most profound relationship is with Nick, a man for whom her feelings alternate between passion and mistrust. At the beginning of their relationship, she refers to him on more than one occasion as her flag, her semaphore (235), leading us to believe that perhaps verbal language isn't as important to their relationship as body language. Passion is important to Offred, as indicated by one meeting with Nick. "There is not much talking between us anymore, not at this stage. Already I am half out of my clothes. We save the talking for later" (346). Thus, Offred has managed to create a strong bond with another person using her senses, particularly her sense of touch.

This bond is strengthened as the relationship grows because the two begin to communicate with language. At their first secret meeting, when they are both frightened and cautious, Nick breaks the ice by using the old cliché, "You come here often?" (339). The talking continues as the two exchange lines from old movies that date "back to an era well before [their] own" (339). This exchange may seem trivial at first, but it is quite important for two reasons. First, it allows Offred and Nick to behave casually around each other. The fear and caution of their first meeting has been replaced, in part, by a growing trust and affection. Secondly, exchanging lines from the movies allows both parties to remember happy moments from the past and express these memories. This alone is discouraged by the Gilead regime, and the fact
that Nick and Offred break the rules together only strengthens their bond.

The conversation between Nick and Offred moves from the seemingly trivial to the intensely personal. It is with Nick that Offred shares her past memories and her most sacred possession, her name. "I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known" (347). Offred has stated throughout her tale that she doesn’t feel complete without her name, and now, in giving that name to Nick, she is giving herself completely. She is not his possession as she is the Commander’s; she is his equal. This was once a woman who held back, who was never completely connected to her world or even her own life. This has now changed with her relationship to Nick. Nick doesn’t talk much, opting to watch Offred’s face, but when Offred’s betrayal has been discovered by the Commander’s wife, and she is in danger, it is Nick who does the most important talking. In leading her out of the Commander’s house, he invokes three of the most important ideas to Offred. In using the phrase “May Day,” he appeals to Offred’s fighting spirit and her sense of resistance. By mentioning Offred’s own name, he acknowledges her as a complete person who is not property of someone else. And in saying “trust me,” he appeals to Offred’s sense of unity with him. These three phrases effectively sum up the main stages of Offred’s life: resistance, self discovery, and community.

And finally, the handmaid seeks to establish a connection to the unknown audience of her tale, saying “If it’s a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself.”
There's always someone else. A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name" (52-53). It is unclear who this "you" is supposed to be, as Offred addresses him/her often but never provides a specific name. There are so many possibilities though: Luke, Nick, her mother, Moira, her daughter, her unborn child, the previous Offred, the future, all of these, none of these. What is most important, however, is that a you is being addressed. Offred has chosen to tell her story, to endanger herself and possibly her unborn child so that someone can benefit from and understand her experiences. The Republic of Gilead has tried to silence Offred and the other handmaids, but in this instance, she is reaching out to communicate, and it is only through some kind of language that this is possible.

In the end, then, all that Offred is left with is words. She has no weapons, no guarantees that she will be safe as she is carted off by the Eyes. The books and games of the Commander no longer exist; Moira, her mother, Luke, her daughter are gone as well. All she has is her verbal and tactile bond with Nick as he comes close to Offred and utters "Trust me" (376). This is a bond that ultimately comes down to trust in things as easy to manipulate as the English language and the human touch. And as Offred tells us, these in themselves carry no guarantee, but she snatches at the offer. "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers because it can't be helped" (378).

We too are left only with Offred's words, this "handmaid's tale," in which the tremendous influence of language on the maintenance of
power, the acquisition of memory, and the strength of community can be seen. Atwood has shown us both the positive and the negative ways that language can influence and determine our lives. Without language to express ourselves and connect with others, to recall our histories and plan our futures, life becomes meaningless; thus it is a necessary factor in all of our lives. But language can also corrupt and oppress. In the end, we must take the risks that language brings if we are to receive any of its benefits. Atwood’s heroine, a hopeful survivor, symbolizes this compromise. She has been abused by language, but she has also used it as her strength, because as she says, “It’s all I’m left with” (378).

Postmodernism and The Handmaid’s Tale: Narrative Structure, Self-Reflexivity, Ambiguity, and Truth Versus Fiction

Up to this point, we have seen that Margaret Atwood has been influenced by the utopian, dystopian and feminist traditions. Like its predecessors, Atwood’s text is extremely concerned with the complex relationships that exist between power, oppression, the media, language, history, memory, freedom and human dignity. Thus far, though, we have only focused on how language is used by the characters in the society that Atwood has created. It is, however, important to examine the language of this text in a second way, to look closely at the narrative features Margaret Atwood the author uses in The Handmaid’s Tale. The issue, then, is not how language is used by
Offred to tell her story. Rather, we must ask, how does Margaret Atwood use language to tell the story of The Republic of Gilead?

Once again, it is helpful to take a brief look at George Orwell’s 1984 to see the kinds of choices Atwood, in writing a dystopian text, could have made in writing her text. While the two works share similar concerns, they are once again extremely different in how they tell their individual stories. For all of Orwell’s experimentation and innovation in terms of plot and vision, the narrative itself is still quite traditional. In other words, it is linear, chronological (with the exception of a few clearly announced flashbacks), and uses a third-person omniscient narrator. The novel even begins with the “dark and stormy night” weather report in the first sentence, “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen,” (5) and there isn’t a more traditional opening than that. Margaret Atwood’s text reflects much more of a non-traditional, Postmodern influence. This influence can be seen in the areas of narrative structure, self-reflexivity and ambiguity that pervade the novel.

Perhaps the strongest Postmodern influence comes in the actual structure of the tale itself. We are told in the “Historical Notes” at the conclusion of the novel that the story we have just finished reading is actually a transcription of approximately 30 cassette tapes that were found recently. The story we receive, then, has been reconstructed by Professors Pieixoto and Wade based on their understanding of the tapes and of Gilead history. This fact in itself is extremely significant in terms of our understanding of the truth or accuracy of this tale.
First of all, although we don’t know the exact dates of the Gileadean regime, we do know that it originated in the late 1990’s and was definitely established before the year 2000. The Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies takes place on June 25, 2195, so almost 200 years have passed, and “truth,” as we know, is often the victim of historical guesswork. Secondly, the opportunities for personal bias and judgement to sneak into the telling of this tale are numerous. In fact, the very title of the document, The Handmaid’s Tale, exists because of a personal bias of one of the professors. The sexist overtones of this title are also difficult to ignore.

The superscription “The Handmaid’s Tale” was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer; but those of you who know Professor Wade informally, as I do, will understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word tail; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats (381).

This transcript is not the only reconstruction taking place in the novel because the story that Offred initially records onto the tapes is reconstructed in two significant ways. First of all, we are told that these tapes were recorded after Offred was taken by the black van,
presumably arranged by Nick to help her escape. This, of course, would make sense, as a woman who was not allowed to read and write would not have had access to recording equipment. Further, Offred was under constant supervision and would not have had the opportunity to make these tapes. Therefore, Offred is depending upon her memory, a memory that could be distorted by the passage of time and by the drama of the events that have taken place in her life. As Professor Pieixoto tells us, “There is a certain reflective quality about the narrative that would to my mind rule out synchronicity. It has a whiff of emotion recollected, if not in the tranquillity, at least post facto” (384).

The second type of reconstruction that takes place is the most interesting and the most fruitful in understanding that we are reading a version of the story that has been influenced both by the professors and by Offred’s memory itself. In true Postmodern fashion, Margaret Atwood constantly draws attention to the fact that what we are reading is artificial, constructed; we are not reading a perfectly faithful and accurate account of what went on in Gilead. This is something that we don’t find in a novel like Nineteen Eighty-four in which our attentions are firmly focused on the actions of Winston Smith. We are never shifted from that central point; we are never told by Orwell, nor is it even suggested, that “this is a story; this is just pretend.” As Chris Ferns writes, “In the current climate of postmodernist fictional experiment, fiction seeks to expose and explore its own fictionality” (453).
In Atwood's text, though, what is truth and what is fabrication is often unclear, not only in our minds but in Offred's as well. "This is the Atwood novel that draws most deliberate attention to its own artifice. The title itself emphasizes the fictive quality of the book--it is specifically presented as a tale--and allusions to the story as a story, rather than a direct account, accumulate" (Keith 126). After the title, the first time in the text that we encounter this dilemma occurs when Offred tells us:

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling.
I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off. It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along (52).

At this point in the text, readers have no idea what is going on. They haven't yet read the "Historical Notes," so they do not know that this passage is being narrated into a cassette and then transcribed 200 years later. Further, the passage is ambiguous because Offred herself doesn't know what is reality and what is story, as evidenced by the "It is a story/it isn't a story" contradictions in the passage. Most important, however, this passage has served as a collective splash of cold water for readers of the novel. We are no longer "suspending our
disbelief" and stepping into the story. Rather, we have been forced to take a step back and examine that what we are reading is a text. In Atwood's writing, it appears that the story is inseparable from the storyteller. The "truth" of Offred's tale cannot be distinguished from Offred herself, for we are dependent upon her for every detail of her story. We can go through the tale point by point to try to determine its accuracy, but we have no guarantees. Just as Offred had to believe in the words of Nick that he wouldn't betray her, we must believe that she won't betray us.

This ambiguity and fragmentation in story telling is no more obvious than when Offred speculates about what has happened with her husband Luke. Offred tells us of three different fates of Luke. First, Luke was killed when Offred was captured, and his body is now "lying face down in a thicket, a tangle of bracken, the brown fronds from last year under the green ones just unrolled" (132). But Offred also believes that Luke is alive, that he has been captured, and that he is "sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, gray cement on a ledge or the edge of something, a bed or chair. God knows what he's wearing, God knows what they've put him in" (133). Finally, Offred says, "I also believe that they didn't catch him or catch up with him after all, that he made it, reached the bank, swam the river, crossed the border, dragged himself up on the far shore, an island, teeth chattering" (134).

What is most significant about the above passage is that Offred isn't saying that she believes in version A, B, or C. She is saying that she believes, that she must believe, in versions A, B, and C,
simultaneously. She acknowledges that this, logically and rationally, doesn’t make sense, but in her world, a world void of all logic or reason that she can see, she has no choice.

The things I believe can’t all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it (135).

In a marvelous irony, what Atwood has achieved in the mind of Offred is what Orwell’s Oceania wanted to achieve in its citizens with its implementation of “doublethink.” In Orwellian terms, “doublethink” meant the mutual existence of two or more contradictory pieces of information in the mind of the thinker, and it depended on “an unwearying, moment-to-moment flexibility in the treatment of facts” (Orwell 175). This is clearly going on in the mind of Offred.

Readers get another example of multiple versions of the same story when Offred tells us of her first sexual encounter with Nick. This story too has three versions. After telling us one that is romantic and filled with passion, she says, “I made that up. It didn’t happen that way. Here is what happened” (338). She then tells us a version that is probably more in keeping with the “truth” in which Offred and Nick are uncomfortable and suspicious of each other. But after this version, we are once again told, “It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure
how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate" (340). In these stories involving Luke and Nick, it isn't that Offred is "stringing us along" or purposely deceiving us. Rather, she is trying to create a reality using an insufficient tool, language. She and Atwood seem to be saying that the truth is complex and multiple and not captured by a few words.

After reading this tale, one wonders why Offred tells us her story at all, since it is obviously painful for her. At one point, she says, "I don't want to be telling this story. I don't have to tell it. I don't have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else. I could just sit here, peacefully. I could withdraw. It's possible to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get to you" (291). In relating the events of her meetings with Nick and her attendance at a Salvaging, she wishes her story were different, more civilized. "I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it" (343-344). Why then, does Offred tell us her collection of stories?

One reason that Offred tells some of her stories is to distract her (and us) from the pain she feels in her own life. For example, she tells us a story of her friend Moira. In this case, Moira's story replaces Offred's tale. As Offred says, "I'm too tired to go on with this story. I'm too tired to think about where I am. Here is a different story, a better one. This is the story of what happened to Moira" (166). What actually happens to Moira isn't as interesting as the fact that Offred has
interrupted the reporting of her own painful experiences to tell us of Moira’s exploits. In this particular version, Offred even announces that she is fabricating parts of Moira’s escape, making comments like, “Aunt Lydia didn’t repeat any of this part to Janine, but I expect Moira said something like it,” (170) and later, after hearing what actually happened from Moira at Jezebel’s, Offred tells us, “This is what she says, whispers, more or less. . . . I’ve filled it out for her as much as I can: we didn’t have much time so she just gave me the outlines. . . . I’ve tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It’s a way of keeping her alive” (316). Thus, even at its best and most efficient use, language can only present parts and fragments of reality, of truth. It can never capture every detail.

Because of all of this “jumping” around from story to story and from place to place, the frame of reference for The Handmaid’s Tale gets more and more confusing. Unlike 1984, in which Winston Smith’s “jumps” are clearly announced by phrases such as “he was struggling backward into the dim period of his early childhood,” (30) the flashbacks and fantasies that Offred experiences are not quite as easy to pick out. Sometimes, in fact, the present bleeds directly into the flashback with absolutely no warning. On the evening of the Ceremony, while kneeling in the parlour, Offred tells us, “We wait, the clock in the hall ticks, Serena lights another cigarette. I get into the car. It’s a Saturday morning, it’s a September, and we still have a car. Other people have had to sell their cars. My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden” (108). A
novel like *1984*, with its straightforward and linear chronology, doesn’t offer the kinds of complications that Atwood serves her readers, the jumping back and forth through time evidenced here.

Even after readers have concluded the book and know from the “Historical Notes” that the story they thought was happening “in progress” was really a story Offred recorded after the fact, confusion still exists. One illustrative example of this confusing frame of reference occurs when Offred tells us, “All of it is a reconstruction. It’s a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn’t have said, what I should or shouldn’t have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here--” (173).

This passage seems to blend two temporal frames of reference. The “single bed” and the rehearsals of what should and should not have been said may point to the time when Offred is a handmaid. But the phrase, “this is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction” puts readers in the time frame of when Offred is no longer a handmaid and is recording (and thus reconstructing) her tale. Such a blend of time, of the past and present, is a clear feature of Postmodernist writing. With all of this manipulation of time going on, it is difficult to understand exactly where Offred is in terms of the story she tells. She floats around her tale like a mist rather than marching through it, in a linear fashion, like a drum major. This, again, demonstrates the writing as artifice, not as an actual attempt to render “the truth” faithfully.
The Handmaid’s Tale is filled with ambiguity. Much of this surrounds the characters and their lives. What becomes of Offred, Nick, Luke, Moira, Offred’s mother and daughter, Offred and Nick’s unborn child? The ending gives us very few clues about most of these people, and we know only that Offred survives long enough to make the tapes on which her story is based. Beyond that, we have only questions because of the many voices involved in the actual telling of this tale. As Linda Kauffmann writes, “The novel’s re-presentation of speech is a reconstruction several times removed, for Offred’s discourse is muted, mediated, and modified by the interventions of time and technology, and by masculine writing appended to her own” (222).

We readers certainly want to know what became of the characters of this story because we have grown to care for them (or at least most of them). There are other questions in The Handmaid’s Tale that are left unanswered, at least for me. At the center of this novel is the question, “What is the true story of Offred?” Margaret Atwood herself denies that the ability to convey the “whole truth” through writing is possible, so it should come as no surprise that this account is filled with contradictions and unanswered questions. Atwood said, in an interview with Tom Vitale:

I evoke; evoking is quite different from writing down the whole truth. . . . The truth is very very large and very multiple. When you are telling a story, you have to necessarily select. . . . If we had total recall we would remember everything,
but we remember selectively. (A Moveable Feast)

At the heart of The Handmaid’s Tale are memory and choice. Offred chooses which details to record, the professors choose which to transcribe; Margaret Atwood chooses which details to create, and we readers choose which deserve response. In a book that focuses on freedom of choice and freedom of expression, Margaret Atwood’s text is a perfect example of Postmodernism in action, for not only do the plot, the dialogue, and the characterization reflect the ambiguity and conflict inherent in describing “reality,” so too does the very narrative structure of The Handmaid’s Tale.

A Final Look at The Handmaid’s Tale: Implications of the “Historical Notes” and Looking Towards the Future

As if Margaret Atwood hadn’t given her readers enough to think about in the main portion of her text, she certainly given them added food for thought in the last section of her book, an appendix entitled “Historical Notes on The Handmaid’s Tale.” In only 17 pages, in which Atwood explains how Offred’s tale came to us in its present written form, Atwood manages to point out the reconstructed nature of fiction and reality and provide us with some clues about how much, and in some ways, how little the future has changed.

The “Historical Notes” of the text serve many functions as does almost every other feature of the novel. One function of this section is that it simply tells us how Offred’s account became public. We learn
that a footlocker containing cassettes was unearthed near Bangor, Maine. We also learn a more complete history of Gilead society, a history that Offred did not have had access to. Of course, just like Offred’s tale, this history is highly speculative and subject to personal bias. As Arnold Davidson says, Atwood’s text points out that “how we choose to construct history partly determines the history we are likely to get” (115).

Offred’s account is immediately objectified, the focus of academic scrutiny, and some critics, including Davidson, comment that Atwood seems to be satirizing the tendency, among academic types, to turn everything, no matter how painful or poignant, into intellectual fodder. One can’t help but feel disgusted by the way these scholars trivialize so heartfelt and moving an account. The keynote speaker, Professor Pieixoto, is warned to keep his comments brief so that lunch won’t be missed as it was the day before. This, of course, is followed by laughter. The title of the transcript, as mentioned before, has sexist overtones, as does one author’s dubbing of the Underground Femaleroad the “Underground Frailroad,” possibly referring to perceived weakness and inferiority of women (381). Rather than feel the emotion of the entry before them, these scholars only lament that Offred wasn’t more like them. Personally, I’m grateful she wasn’t like them if this is what academic life is all about. Some of the historical questions of Gilead could have been answered, says Professor Pieixoto, if only the author would have acted, apparently, less selfishly in telling only her own story.
She could have told us about the workings of the Gileadean empire had she the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What we would not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of print-out from Waterford’s computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us. (393)

What these scholars have apparently failed to grasp from Offred’s “crumbs” is the tremendous oppression and danger involved in even committing minor infractions under Gilead law, much less becoming a spy. Offred makes it clear that she wants to survive, if not for herself, then for the unborn child she carries. It is highly patronizing for these people, safely cocooned in their books and presentations and luncheons, to critique the actions of a person with whom they have so little in common.

The scholars, in Atwood’s estimation, have missed the point of Offred’s account. In using the tale to speculate about Gileadean life and its practices, they have objectified it to a frightening degree. As Professor Pieixoto says:

We must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that judgments are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from
which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand.

(Applause). (383)

When a society can find excuses to tolerate oppression and murder for the sake of anything, be it a "demographic factor," cultural specificity or an intellectual desire to "understand," it hasn't learned anything from its history. Even more importantly, it lays the groundwork for a possible repetition of that history. Offred herself, the woman of dubious education (having graduated from a twentieth-century college for whatever that's worth, according to Pieixoto), seems to have demonstrated more outrage and understanding of her predicament than all of these scholars combined. When Offred said earlier in her account, "One detaches oneself. One describes," (123) she could have been talking about any member of this symposium.

Nevertheless, Atwood's Post-Gilead world described in 2195 indeed seems to be an improvement over the world of Gilead. On the surface, dramatic improvements in democracy and human rights have been made. The "Historical Notes" demonstrate that the theocracy of Gilead no longer exists. Ironically, Atwood cites the precedent for her "Historical Notes" as coming from 1984. While most people remember the hopeless ending of Orwell's text, the fact that Winston's rebellion has been defeated and that he "loved Big Brother" (245), the text actually ends with an appendix entitled, "The Principles of Newspeak." This appendix, ending with a note on the language used in Oceania, is
written in the past tense and in standard English. As Atwood reminds us:

Now if we take that as part of the novel, what we are being told by that note is that the regime in 1984 did not succeed in eliminating English as a language and also that Newspeak is in the past; it’s finished. So Orwell is in fact somewhat more optimistic in 1984 than people usually give him credit for being. (A Moveable Feast)

There is, then, reason for optimism and hope in reading the ending to *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The world of the twenty-second century can (and does) take great pride in the fact that it has evolved beyond the obvious inequalities of Gilead. But these “Historical Notes” also raise one of the most important questions of the novel. How different, really, is the “enlightened” world of 2195 from the Republic of Gilead? We see by the surnames of the presenters at this conference, names such as Running Dog, Crescent Moon, Pieixoto, Wade, Chatterjee, and Van Buren, that higher education has seemingly become multi-cultural. The sexes of the presenters are not always clear, itself a good sign that perhaps this world has moved beyond thinking it necessary to focus on such matters. In fact, the Chair of this committee, Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, is female, so perhaps this world has become more egalitarian. But what about the rest of the world? Further, when we see what kinds of responses get laughter and
applause ("Our job is not to censure but to understand" and the comments on "The Handmaid’s tail" and "the Underground Frailroad,"
 it is clear that this society is not perfect either. Most unsettling is how these people treat Offred’s account. Earlier in the text, as she waited for the Ceremony to begin, Offred said, "I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (86). In Professor Pieixoto’s attempts to advance his career at the expense of his own humanity and outrage, he has turned Offred into "a made thing, not something born" as well, stripping away her pain and suffering in a matter of minutes during his "little chat" (381).

Atwood’s text, then, ends on a mixed note. The philosophy of Gilead was clearly a disaster and in the world of 2195, while definitely an improvement, sexual inequality can still be found. Even idealized "feminist" utopias such as Gilman’s Herland, Bryant’s The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You, Russ’ “When it Changed,” and Gearhart’s The Wanderground come under Atwood’s scrutiny in this text. Some key concerns of the feminist utopia, such as the need for gender equality and a stronger connection to, and awareness of, the environment, are issues that Atwood finds important for consideration. We are left to wonder whether the disasters of Gilead could have been avoided if only the society would have adopted some of the ideas of Gilman, Russ, Bryant or Gearhart. In these societies, political matters are the concern of everyone. Councils form to discuss questions, to find solutions to problems, but these councils are cooperative and act only on the wishes
of the citizens, showing true democracy in action. Democracy in action is hardly what exists in Gilead. The gender-based inequality that existed before Gilead was created is what led to the establishment of the oppressive regime. Further, this inequality now forms the crux of the power structure that keeps Gilead in place.

Atwood also chronicles the deteriorating environment and how this has put Gilead in its precarious position. It was a full-scale attack upon the environment, a blatant disregard for the limitations of the land, sea, and sky that caused the pollution of present-day America. Again, if only the citizens of Gilead had, like the feminist utopian citizens, adopted some practices whereby the land was not abused or asked to support more than it possibly could, where humans lived with the land, not off the land, Gilead might not be where it is. As Luciente tells Connie, “We’re cautious about gross experiments. ‘In biosystems, all factors are not knowable.’ First rule we learn when we study living beings” (Piercy 97). A lack of caution and ignoring our connection to this planet are in part what led to the horrors of Gilead in the first place.

At first, then, we can infer that the ideas of gender equality and environmental consciousness proposed by feminist utopias seem to be supported by Atwood. But once again, Atwood sends us dual messages. Communities composed entirely of women such as Herland, The Wanderground and Whileaway are also highlighted in The Handmaid’s Tale. Several times in the novel, the handmaids are asked to pull together for the sake of the worldwide unity of women. One wonders
where the men are in the scenarios that Aunt Lydia spins for her “girls”:

For the generations that come after, Aunt Lydia said, it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family. . . . Women united for a common cause as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task. Why expect one woman to carry out all functions necessary to the serene running of a household? (209-210)

This request could come directly out of the feminist utopias previously mentioned in which women banded together against their common enemies and struggled to establish societies which were egalitarian and cooperative.

In Herland, perhaps the most idyllic of the feminist utopias, dissension and competition among women have virtually been eliminated. Instead, this is a society rich in art, culture, scientific thought and history. Herland does differ from other utopian texts, however, in that its culture is not stagnant. The citizens of Herland believe that their ways of life can always be improved and so changes are always occurring. One wonders, however, if this society will eventually reach a point of perfection in which no improvement can take place, especially since it is so close to this state now. The society is so positive, so enriching, it ceases to become believable, and perhaps it is this sort of fantasy to which Atwood is responding. While it can’t
be denied that several communities of women exist in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the handmaids, the Jezebels, the Marthas, the women involved with May Day Resistance, it is equally clear that these communities are far from the government-sanctioned unions advocated by the Aunts or the united societies of women created by the feminist utopian writers mentioned. If anything, the women of this novel have joined hands to resist the forces of Gilead, not to promote them. They don’t want to be lumped together in communes, separated from men. Even the leadership of other women, of the Aunts, which is cited in the “Historical Notes” as a particularly ingenious move on the part of the Gilead, doesn’t help promote a sense of common purpose for the handmaids. The handmaids fear the world-wide community that the Aunts propose.

When a character like Offred makes comments such as, “[Mother], you wanted a woman’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies,” (164) and “If Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away. . . . You couldn’t just ignore them” (223), she condemns this notion of the perfect female and egalitarian society as well. Clearly, then, all-male societies such as Gilead and all-female societies such as feminist utopias are not the answers. Even a society such as the world of 2195, which claims to have achieved gender equality, can’t quite make it. Is there, then, any solution to the oppression that plagues both our society and theirs?
The only answer, the only solution to this question, seems to combine a diligent struggle towards equality with a guarded hope that we might get there. Just as Winston Smith viewed sex as a political act, Margaret Atwood sees writing, observing, and communicating as a political act necessary to achieve any sort of improvement. Easy answers and simple solutions don't exist, but the very act of communicating is, for Atwood and her characters, "the final and irrevocable commitment to one's society and to one's own humanity" (Rigney 121). Winston Smith listened to the voice of the thrush in the "Golden Country" and asked, "For whom, for what was that bird singing? No mate, no rival was watching it. What made it sit at the edge of the lonely wood and pour its music into nothingness?" (103). We need to ask, too, what makes the handmaid tell her tale in spite of the obvious pain it brings her? Why does she sit in solitude and pour out her tragic story into nothingness? The answer, which historians like Wade and Pieixoto do not seem to understand, is that she does it for the future. Despite her own pain, she tells us her story so that another handmaid will never do the same. Because of the child she thinks she carries, she feels it necessary to stop ignoring and start participating in the world in order to achieve a better life for her daughter. In this way, Offred best honors the memories of her own mother, a woman who sacrificed much for her daughter's better future. As Offred was told by her mother, "You don't know what we had to go through just to get you where you are" (156). Just as Offred writes for the future, Margaret Atwood has written for the present, challenging
us to see the inequality and oppression in our own lives and work to eliminate them. As long as writers like Atwood and characters like Offred continue to share their stories, there may be then, a tiny spot of hope left alive for us. After reading, “Any questions,” the last line of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, my question is, “Will there be anyone willing to listen?”
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