Dystopian Descriptions of Reality

Historicizing Patriarchy Through Fiction in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

By

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Abstract

This thesis sets out to understand the experiential realities of patriarchy in a 1980s American context through Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. First, fiction and the genre of dystopia are evaluated for their qualities as instruments of historical inquiry. Second, Paul Ricœur's literary and political theories are combined to create a framework for assessing the political criticism in dystopias, and using this, *The Handmaid's Tale* is evaluated for its critique of both the rise of the New Right and Radical Feminism in the 1980s. Third, an approach inspired by both New Historicism and feminist criticism is used to show how the literary text unintentionally reveals much more about the patriarchal political forces of its age than even its intentional criticism of the same phenomena. Fourth, this thesis argues that patriarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale* is best understood through Michel Foucault's theory of power as an all-pervasive network of disciplinary micro-process, which the dystopian world of the text exposes by extrapolating patriarchal power into a physical totalitarian state. Finally, a close reading further reveals the historical patriarchal forces that influenced the text at the very site of its production in 1985, and this raises the question, to what extent *The Handmaid's Tale* ultimately challenged or merely reproduced the patriarchal literary norms of its era. Despite the difficulties of using literature to understand the past, this study also reveals the strengths of this method as *The Handmaid's Tale* is shown to be not only a dystopian critique but also a cultural record of the patriarchal pressures of its era.

Acknowledgements

I did not write this thesis.

As the popularly presumed author is merely the nexus point—Foucault's author function, Barthes's Zombie author, and New Historicism's (con)text—by which much larger social, political, cultural, and other forces enter and shape the text, as I shall later argue in my thesis, then I wish to absolve myself of any praise or criticism that might be due the following document. If I have done anything right, I would like to direct credit for that, in reverse chronological order: to my Adviser, Czigányik Zsolt, who has supported and shared my desire to combine the disciplines of politics and literature; to my Second Reader, Sanjay Kumar, who is as enthusiastic as I am to endeavour this task within the History Department at the Central European University; to the aforementioned department and university, both, for giving me a place to pursue my passion and for introducing me to my love of humanities theory (even if both department and university still pretend that historiography is a social science); to Didem Şalgam for arguing Foucault, Spivak, and Derrida with me and helping ensure that I didn't, as Stephen Greenblatt has been accused of, internalize and incorporate feminist theory without attribution; to Mandarin Hostel, Budapest, for giving an ethical non-consumer a place to live and study; to my former boss, Probir Kumar Sarkar (1958-2017), at *The Global Intelligence*, who kept my typing fingers in shape and my editing pencil sharpened these last six years; to my brother, who encouraged me to apply to CEU and who, in terms of my causality, is like both a swimmer in the next lane and a wrestler across the sand by how much he has driven me forward and shaped who I am; and last but chronologically first, to my parents and my upbringing, who and which raised me in a position of privilege, globally speaking, not under a totalitarian regime, and provided me with love and support such that I think, perhaps, I experienced a little less of Foucault's capillaric apparatus of discipline than did most growing up. To all of them, thank you.

It seems only fair to add, however, that any criticism this thesis receives must also be due to one of the above.

This thesis is for my Mom, specifically,
for lending me her copy of *The Handmaid's Tale.*

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Chapter 1 – Introduction: Something Unique About Fiction

There is something unique about fiction. If that sounds vague, it's because it's meant to. I've called up, chained down, and negotiated deals with over a dozen philosophers and critics, both living and dead, for just the smallest insight into this category of text we call fiction, and in order to get away, they've told me everything from fiction is just that which is not real,[1] to fiction is exactly as real as any 'fact'.[2] They've ranged from the conservative—fiction is those texts which we label 'fiction'[3]—to the radical—everything that's ever been written is a fiction.[4] And when they began to give more specific examples they were no less confusing; they said that fictions exist within their historical contexts,[5] but that history itself is a fiction.[6] I began to realize I was going to have to separate the fact from fiction myself.

Despite the boldest claims of the post-structuralists, it seems fair to say that, for most practical purposes, fiction functions somewhere between the two extremes of this spectrum—it is not entirely divorced from reality, but neither has it subsumed all of reality—and the practical is what I'm concerned with in

1 Plato, paraphrased in Ruth Ronen. *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory.* Cambridge: Cambridge University. Press, 1994. p7.

2 H. Aram Veeser. *The New Historicism Reader.* New York: Routledge, 1994. p17.

3 Ronen 27.

4 Jacques Derrida. *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds. E*d Peddy Kamuf. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. p32.

5 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. "Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism." *The New Historicism*. Ed H. Aram Veeser. Routledge: New York, 1989. p217.

6 Hayden White. "New Historicism: A Comment." *The New Historicism*. Ed H. Aram Veeser. Routledge: New York, 1989. p297.

this thesis. I want to know how a collection of words that we call ‘fiction’ can help me understand the world of ‘facts’.

The Handmaid’s Tale is a novel, according to its publisher;[7] dystopian literature, according to its author, Margaret Atwood;[8] and a work of fiction, according to its inside cover—“Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental,” it says.[9][10] It was published in 1985, and yet when I read it, thirty years later in 2015, I felt ill.

Imagine that like the main character Offred, your society dictates that because you didn’t follow its moral norms, because you had an extramarital lover, you would be enslaved to carry a foetus until birth. You would lose your job and your agency over your own body and become little more than a “two-legged womb” in society’s eyes.[11] If you protested, no one would listen; you would be told that producing children is your sole purpose. This is not fiction, I thought, this is the reality that millions of women experience every day; this is patriarchal oppression made so palpable that even I, who have not faced any of the gender discrimination that women have, can begin to understand what living under a patriarchy is like.

Why do I use the word ‘patriarchy’ here? Patriarchy is a challenging theoretical concept. It has been categorized as both an ideology and a material process,[12] but its exact definition has been shown to be historically and

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7 Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Toronto: Seal Books, 1985.

8 Margaret Atwood. “Genesis of the Handmaid’s Tale and the Role of the Historical Notes.” *The Handmaid’s Tale, Roman Protéen: Conference de Margaret Atwood.* Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1999. p10.

9 Atwod THT.

10 We all know that is just a fiction of a different sort written by an industry with more concern for financial liability than literary criticism.

11 Atwood THT 128.

12 Cynthia Cockburn quoted in Joan Acker. “The Problem with Partiarchy.” *Sociology*. May 89. Volume 23. Issue 2. p236.

culturally conditional.[13] It is perhaps for this reason that the question, ‘What is patriarchy?’ has no specific answer. Nonetheless, the term pervades feminist discourse because it articulates something common to the plurality of experiences of those who have been marginalized by a gender hierarchy in society. If patriarchy is then more easily felt through experience than defined by theory, I wondered, perhaps fiction is an ideal form of discourse for coming to an understanding of the mechanisms of patriarchal oppression.

Novels like *THT*,[14] however, only ever deal with the general in terms of the specific—as Margaret Atwood says, stories are most always about heterogeneous individuals, never a homogenous mass.[15] Furthermore, novels are usually only written by one person. Many thousands may have inspired the author, but she is the nexus point connecting all these various inspirations that led to the production of the text in the time(s) and place(s) of its construction. A novel is shaped by only one historically situated and heterogeneous collection of experiences, but that collection is produced at the confluence of many broader social, political, cultural, economic, ideological, and other forces that have also influenced other people. The production of *THT* was influenced by the same forces that pervaded Anglo-American society in 1985. Perhaps the novel is so unique to Atwood that it reveals nothing common to the experiences of other women, but to the extent that the novel has become a

13 Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990. p173.

14 I will here forward most often refer to *The Handmaid's Tale* as *THT* in order to more clearly distinguish between "*THT*", a text produced in a time and a place, and "the handmaid's tale", Offred's story within that text.

15 Margaret Atwood, quoted in Gregory Claeys. *Dystopia: A Natural History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. p269.

bestseller and resonated with many thousands of readers,[16] it is worth studying as a particular example of the plurality of experiences under patriarchy.

If patriarchy is not a historical constant,[17] then it is best not to think of 'patriarchy', as one universal concept, but of 'patriarchies', produced in the actions and interactions of individual persons—each a node in a network of dispersed yet interconnected social and political pressures, which can only be united metaphorically, as in the term 'patriarchy'. A novel then can reflect precisely one historically situated interpretation of patriarchal forces. To the extent that any one person can have experiences best deserving of the name 'patriarchy', fiction may be able to communicate that in a way that illuminates the plurality through the particular. What I seek to answer in this thesis is how does a novel like *THT*, a dystopian fiction, communicate a woman's experience of social and political forces in 1980s North America, across genders and across generations, to a man reading the text thirty years later?

In order to answer this question, it would be quite hypocritical of me ignore the life of Margaret Atwood, as Barthes would have me do.[18] First of all, if my goal is to understand the experiences of a woman's oppression through her fiction, I should listen to that woman's story rather than begin speaking for her.[19] Second, Atwood is very much alive, and as a literary critic herself, she has said a lot about both authorship in general and *THT* in particular, which will be both impossible to either ignore or to fully agree with in this analysis. Third,

16 With Donald Trump's recent election in the United States supported by the religious conservative "silent majority", frequent references in the media, and the release of a new television series based on *THT*, sales of the novel have climbed. There may be no better indication that the story still resonates today. As the 10 episode television series is being released conterminous with the production of this thesis, it's analysis is not included within.

17 Walby 173.

18 See Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text.* London: Fontana Press, 1977.

19 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.* Ed C. Nelson and L. Grossman. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988. p91.

in my pursuit of the social and political forces in a particular historical context, I will be using a New Historicist reading to look at the ways in which the text and context simultaneously embody and illuminate each other.[20] This means, as highlighted above, Atwood is to be considered the nexus point through which historical forces enter and shape the text. That Atwood has had the experiences of a marginalized gender, for example, is intimately connected to the text of *THT*. The writing of the text itself, like the trail left by a snake in sand, is considered to contain traces of those historically situated forces.

What do I mean by the forces that shape the text? As this idea is key to my analysis, I will give some examples. I mean not only the visible productive influences that inspire a writer, but the invisible negative influences that impose limits on what can be published and even on what can be imagined: things like the trends in the available words in one's lexicon, the narrative norms of one's contemporary mythology, the social pressures to fit one's gender role, the financial pressures to provide for one's family, the stresses of capitalism, career, and literal survival—as in, what forces must one give in to in order to put food on their table? These are the sorts of diverse pressures—situated within broader categories like class, race, and gender—that converge on the nexus point of the author and shape the production of the text.

Because I do not wish to speak over Atwood in this thesis, I will begin my analysis in *Chapter 2* by exploring what Ricœur calls the "intentionality" of the text,[21] which used to be called the 'author's intentions', and is best understood in the case of *THT* through it's embodiment of the literary genre of dystopia; Atwood intended to write a dystopia. I will define the term utopia, anti-utopia,

20 Fox-Genovese 217.

21 Mario J. Valdes. "Paul Ricoeur and Literary Theory". *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur.* Np: The Library of Living Philosophers, 1995. p266.

and dystopia with reference to the *THT*, and assess why literature generally and the genre of dystopia specifically have been historically used as tools to respond to contemporary politics. In *Chapter 3*, I will ask how dystopias, which are supposedly fictions, can respond to politics, which is supposedly real; I will attempt to answer the question proposed by the opening paragraph of my thesis: how can 'fiction' critique 'fact'? Using a combination of Ricœur's political and literary theories I will assess how fiction has the ability as metaphor to contribute to the discourse of reality and how dystopias, as literature, have been used and can be used as thought experiments to critique the political ideologies of their era. Evaluating the dystopian critique of *THT* will show that the text is best understood in its historical context of 1980s America during the rise of both the New Right and Radical Feminism.

I will then move beyond Atwood's intentionality by applying New Historicist theory in *Chapter 4*. Examining the influence of context on text will show how the political criticism in *THT* is itself shaped by the broader social and cultural forces of Atwood's age. Moving beyond the target of the text's dystopian thought experiment reveals the biases of the ideologies at the root of *THT* as well as where the text sits within 1980s feminist discourse. These same biases, however, arise from a subjective experience that provides the strength of the text when critiquing patriarchal oppression. In *Chapter 5*, I tackle the subject of patriarchy. I start with current academic discourse on the subject and then attempt to use *THT*, its political context, and Foucault's theory of power as dispersed disciplinary micro-processes in order to develop an understanding of the form of patriarchy that is depicted in *THT*. I will evaluate how this definition of patriarchy is communicated through *THT*'s metaphoric contribution to discourse and then asses what it reveals about Offred's acts of resistance to

the totalitarian state. Finally, in *Chapter 6*, this definition of patriarchy challenges me to evaluate to what extent the text of *THT* itself was shaped by the disciplinary apparatus of patriarchal norms within contemporary society, how much *THT* merely reproduces patriarchal discourse, and whether it is ultimately subversive.

In this thesis, I will show that fiction inherently engages with factual discourse, but like all discourse, its position will be influenced by historical biases. No author is an ideologically free agent, and fiction—not constrained by world of the actual—is perhaps even more so vulnerable to the biases at the nexus of its construction than other forms of discourse. The ideological biases and influences of an author, however, are still a form of historical fact. Fiction assuredly reveals at least one fact about the era in which it was written: its own subjectivity. Fiction can communicate truths about the world of its creation when it explores topics for which subjective experience has greater value for understanding factual reality. When it comes to topics like gender-based oppression, fiction can reveal both a valuable subjective experience and the ideological constraints of the oppression itself. With a close reading of both text and context, *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals the presence of historical patriarchal forces in both a woman's subjective voice and the limits of her voice—in both what the text says and what it does not say

1.i **- Why this Book in this Time and this Place?**

Why *The Handmaid's Tale*? And why now? I realized that I needed to better understand the patriarchal world I had grown up in, and Margaret Atwood's dystopian fiction could help me do that. I herein engage in a New

Historicist orientation of myself as reader with respect to the text[22] in order to evaluate the limits of my own subjectivity, with inspiration from feminist standpoint theory.[23]

THT was first published in Canada in 1985; the same year marked the commencement of the second term of the Christian conservative President Ronald Reagan south of the border with the support of America's 'Moral Majority'. The following year, *THT* was published in the United States, and north of the border, I was born. Like Margaret Atwood, I am Canadian, but I was raised in a world inherently unlike the one she was raised in. Whereas she grew up in Ontario in the 1940s,[24] I grew up in Nova Scotia in the 1990s. Whereas she attended graduate school in the United States, where she got some of her inspiration for *THT*, I went to Hungary. It goes without saying that she has simply had thousands of experiences, both large and small, innocent and informative, that I have never had, but, significantly, to the extent to which we share an ethnicity, a nationality, and an academic love of literature, it might be fair to say our differences of experiences spring primarily from our two main differences: that of generation and of gender. In addition to the effect of the eras in which we were born, we have been socialized and treated differently in life along dividing lines caused by the way society has perceived and constructed a gender binary of 'men' and 'women'. To generalize, but also to recognize that the way each person interacts with social forces is unique, it is fair to say that Atwood's experiences were shaped by her exposure to the

22 Veeser NHR 5.

23 For more on this, see Brenda J. Allen. "Feminist Standpoint Theory: a Black Woman's Review of Organizational Socialization". Communication Studies, Vol 47, No 4, 1996.

24 Shanon Hengen. "Margaret Atwood's Nature." *The Handmaid's Tale, Roman Protéen: Conference de Margaret Atwood.* Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1999. p77.

feminine social norms of her era while mine by exposure to the masculine social norms of my era.

My own upbringing has given me a profound recognition of the humanist ideals of equality and justice; my later years, however, have made me realize the two are not inherently connected. So-called equality under the law does not create justice for those who have been socially marginalized. To help overcome this, I want to listen to, empathize with, and bolster the voices of those who have faced marginalization. The gender turn[25] and post-colonial[26] turn in the humanities have revealed that the canonical narratives we are raised on, in both so-called fiction and so-called history, represent only an infinitesimal fraction of the experiences of our species. And, importantly, the privileged master narratives of our cultures are self-perpetuating. It is this ideologically biased-selection of narratives to which we are exposed that create our perception of ourselves and others, of our genders and their genders.[27] The words ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, to whom they apply, and how we should treat the people to whom they apply, are created in part by the fictions we read and hear—whether or not they are labelled ‘fiction’. Gender is socially constituted, says Butler.[28] It is thus necessary for the researcher who is interested not only in justice and in the truth of ‘what really happened’, but in how their own truth is created, to seek out the voices and stories of those who are different from them.

25 See Joan Kelly. “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” *Women, History and Theory.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

26 See Spivak CtSS.

27 Joan W. Scott. “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” *The American Historical Review,* Vol 91, No 5, 1986. p1070.

28 Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge, 2006. p9.

There is a certain contradiction, however, at the heart of my research. I seek to understand voices different from my own, but I can inevitably only understand them in terms of my own voice.[29] Worse, if I fail to sufficiently grapple with this obstacle, I may find myself, as Spivak says, merely "representing", in the terms of a political representative acting by proxy, rather than adequately "re-presenting", in the terms of art or a portrait[30] the perspectives in *THT*. If this is the case, I will do further injustice to a woman's voice by subsuming it beneath my own.[31] The worst-case-scenario effect of this is when entire cabinets of male political 'representatives' vote on and enact laws that affect female bodies, and they end up, as Atwood says, making "slaves" out of women who cannot access abortions.[32] I must be "uncomfortably aware" as Montrosse says, when he found himself in a similar position, "that the trajectory of this essay courts the danger of reproducing what it purports to analyze, namely the appropriation and effacement of the experience of ... women by the dominant discourse of European Patriarchy."[33]

I aim to overcome this challenge by speaking to, "(rather than listening to or speaking for)," in Spivak's words,[34] Margret Atwood—she in this case represented to the best of my ability by her text and various interviews and lectures I will quote. Margaret Atwood, however, does not fit Spivak's definition

29 Sara Lennox "Feminism and New Historicism." *Monatshefte*, Vol 84, No 2, 1992. p169.

30 Spivak CtSS 70.

31 Jane Marcus. "The Asylum of Antaeus: Women, War, and Madess—Is there a Feminist Fetishism?" *The New Historicism*. Ed H. Aram Veeser. Routledge: New York, 1989. p132.

32 Margaret Atwood, quoted n.a. in "Author Margaret Atwood equates Texas law restricting abortion access with slavery." http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2017/06/05/author-margaret-atwood-equates-texas-law-restricting-abortion-access-to-modern-slavery/ Accessed June 6, 2017.

33 Luis Montrosse, "The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery," *Representations*, No 33, Winter 1991. Quoted in Lennox 163.

34 Spivak CtSS 91.

of the subaltern,[35] for her voice has been heard. Atwood has the advantages of academic experience, of commercial success, and now, as a result of writing *THT* and other novels, of having 1.6 million twitter followers helping her voice be heard.[36] I can then be more comfortable engaging in discourse with Atwood's text, and should I overstep by speaking for her, far fewer people will read this thesis than her next interview.

Nonetheless, as I grapple with issues of gender, I need to be conscious of my own patriarchal biases in order to understand even a partial picture of one woman's experience of the social and political forces of patriarchal oppression. I will do this by seeking out as broad an understanding of *THT* as possible. With acknowledgement that I must avoid the New Historicist tendency to subsume the author's text beneath the critic's voice, I will use an exploration of the text through an articulation of its context[37] in order to understand how the plural shapes the particular and thus how the specific is representative of the general. *THT*, the narrative voice of one woman, is the specific; the interconnected network of historical forces that are best defined by the encompassing term, 'patriarchy,' is the general. To borrow Lennox's dictum:

> *If feminists read those texts through their contexts, and their contexts through their texts, though both text and context are necessarily ones we also construct, we become a little more able to hear women who are not like ourselves speak.*[38]

Between the specific and the general, I, the critic—myself an instantaneous nexus at the confluence of social, cultural and political forces—work

35 "If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern anymore." from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critique." *The New Historicism.* Ed H. Aram Veeser. New York: Routledge, 1989. p283.

36 For comparison, I have 57 Twitter followers. May 26, 2017.

37 Fox-Genovese 217.

38 Lennox 169.

transparently and supportively, expanding my reading list as far as possible beyond the covers of *THT*, to help myself and hopefully others understand experiences of patriarchal oppression through *The Handmaid's Tale*.

1.ii – Reading Beyond the Covers of *The Handmaid's Tale*

If I fail to heed my own warning in the preceding section, let the reader be aware of the irony; much of the secondary literature written on *The Handmaid's Tale* has analyzed the ways in which the fictitious historian Professor Pieixoto in the "Historical Notes" epilogue of the novel has appropriated, marginalized, and subsumed the voice of Offred, the narrator of the main plot, in his attempt to analyze her story.[39] In an effort not to become Atwood's Pieixoto—to whatever extent an historian can avoid it—I have evaluated much of the secondary literature on *THT*, which ultimately includes that written by both those with traditionally female and traditionally male

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39 Angela Laflen. "From a Distance, It Looks Like Peace: Reading Beneath the Fascist Style of Gilead in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale." *SCL/ELC,* Vol 32, No 1, 2007.

Arnold E. Davidson. "Historical Notes". *Bloom's Guides: The Handmaid's Tale.* New York: Chelsea House. 2004.

Danita J. Dodson. "'We Lived in the Blank White Spaces': Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial in Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale." *Utopian Studies,* Vol 5, No 5, 1997.

David S. Hogsette."Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in The Handmaid's Tale: The Reader's Role in Empowering Offred's Speech Act". *Critique*, Vol 38, No 4, 1997.

Jacques LeClaire. "The Handmaid's Tale: A Feminist Dystopia." *The Handmaid's Tale, Roman Protéen: Conference de Margaret Atwood.* Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1999.

Karen F. Stein. "Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale: Scheherazade in Dystopia." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol 61, No 2, 1991.

Karen F. Stein. "Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: The Handmaid's Tale." *Canadian Literature* 148, 1996.

Mathieu Duplay "The Handmaid's Tale, New England, and the Puritan Tradition." *The Handmaid's Tale, Roman Protéen: Conference de Margaret Atwood*. Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1999.

Sherril Grace. "Gender as Genre: Atwood's Autobiographical I." *Margaret Atwood, Writing, and Subjectivity: New Critical Essays.* Ed Colin Nicholson. np: St Martin's Press. 1994.

names and as well as that written by both feminist and more conservative critics.

A lot of the research on *THT* has looked at the ways in which language itself, and storytelling by extension, has subversive potential in the text.[40] As a postmodern novel, the text experiments with words and narrative in a way that makes the construction of both integral to the plot.[41] Women in Gilead are not allowed to read or write. Offred plays word games in her head and thus in her narrative in an attempt to maintain her grasp on language. When the literal patriarch of Offred's household is lonely, he invites her to play scrabble with him, a game in which she experiences liberty, however limited. Men alone in Gilead posses the power to read from the master narrative of the new Bible and tell its stories. Offred challenges this by telling her own story. This has been by far the most prevalent avenue of analysis of *THT* by other critics, and so I will touch on it here only when necessary.

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40 See Dodson, Grace, Hogsette, Laflen, Stein SiD, Stein MP, and

Anna De Vaul. "No Light Without Shadow: The Control of Language and Discourse in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Fiction." *Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Fiction.* np:np, 2016.

Brian Johnson. "Language, Power, and Responsibility in The Handmaid's Tale." *Canadian Literature* 148, 1996. Quoted in LeClaire.

Chris Ferns. "The Value/s of Dystopia: The Handmaid's Tale and the Anti-Utopian Tradition." *Dalhousie Review*, Vol 69, No 3, 1989.

Heliane Ventura. Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Pairs: Editions Messene, 1998. Quoted in LeClaire.

Ildney Calvalcanti. "Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias." *Utopian Studies*, Vol 11, No 2, 2000. Quoted in Callaway.

Lucy M. Freibert. "Control and Creativity: THe Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale" Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood. Ed Judith McCombs. Boston: Hall, 1988. Quoted in Hogsette.

Lorraine M. York. "The Habits of Languague, Uniform(ity), Transgression, and Margaret Atwood." *Canadian Literature* 126, 1990. Quoted in LeClaire.

M. Keith Booker. *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide.* London: Greenwood Press, 1994.

41 Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 2002. p139.

The two leading surveys of dystopian literature include *THT* among the more recent canonical texts.[42] Both situate *THT* firmly within the dystopian genre; both say it was heavily inspired by the totalitarianism in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the American religious extremism in Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here;* and both declare that it is the most famous example of a trend of feminist dystopias in the latter quarter of the century. Booker says that sexuality is a matter of "pure political power" in Gilead, and suggests it can best be understood in the text Foucauldian terms because the state does not banish sexuality but controls it to its own end.[43] Although Booker does not elaborate on this, I pick up this line of reasoning and analyze power in Gilead using Foucault's theories in *Chapter 5*.

Another relevant aspect of *THT*, which has been considered by several critics, is the extent to which the novel criticizes not just patriarchal power, but Radical Feminism of the 1980s[44]—though, importantly, some critics, and even Atwood herself in an interview in 1982, have conflated Radical Feminism with the whole of feminism(s).[45] Two significant secondary characters in *THT*,

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42 Booker TRG 83, and

Gregory Claeys. *Dystopia: A Natural History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. p475.

43 Booker TRG 80.

44 See LeClaire, and

Alanna A. Callaway. *Women Disunited: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as a Critique of Feminism.* Dissertation, San Jose State University, 2008.

Barbara Ehrenreich. "Feminist Dystopia". *Bloom's Guides: The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Chelsea House. 2004.

Fiona Tolan. "The Handmaid's Tale: Second Wave Feminism as Anti-Utopia." *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction.* np: np, 2007.

George M. M. Colvile. "The Workings of Regresseion in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale." *The Handmaid's Tale, Roman Protéen: Conference de Margaret Atwood.* Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1999.

Jamie Dopp. "Limited Perspective". *Bloom's Guides: The Handmaid's Tale.* New York: Chelsea House. 2004.

45 Harold Bloom. *Bloom's Guides: The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Chelsea House. 2004. p8, and

Offred's best friend and Offred's mother, are identified as feminists. While their political philosophy is depicted in both positive and negative terms, the narrator ultimately distances herself from their beliefs and compares their zealous ideologies to the totalitarianism of patriarchal Gilead. Her mother's feminist practise of pornography burning is said to have led to the state's book burning. Her best friend Moira initially attempts to oppose the new regime but ultimately, perhaps because she has given up, appears to get what she wants in a "butch paradise" working as one of the Jezebels.[46] Gilead's propaganda espoused by the Aunts appropriates feminist arguments that pornography is bad and that the night is not safe for women; the arguments are then twisted about to support the state's goals of subjugating women, but, as the above mentioned researchers have argued, the narrative nonetheless juxtaposes feminism and Gilead's religious fundamentalism in a way that is unfavourable to the former. I will use their analysis to situate *THT* within, rather than outside of, feminist discourse in *Chapter 4*.

In the critical text that I have found the most revealing, however, Neuman engages in a form of New Historicist reading to expand on what other critics have suggested[47] prove that *THT* was a response to the growing influence of America's New Right, an emergent ultra-religious voter base backing the Republican party in the 1970s and '80s.[48] Referring often to Faludi's research, Neuman says that the conservatism of the New Right was a backlash against the strides and developments made by women in the '60s and '70s.[49]

Margaret Atwood. *Margaret Atwood: Conversations.* Ed Earl G. Ingersoll. Princton: Ontario Review Press, 1990, p140. Quoted in Callaway, p23.

46 Atwood *THT* 134.

47 Bloom 8, and Booker TRG 78.

48 Shirley Neuman. "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and The Handmaid's Tale." *University of Toronto Quarterly,* Vol 75, No 3, 2006. p857.

49 Susan Faludi. Quoted in Neuman 860.

For instance, while abortion had been made legal in 1973, political initiatives pushed by the New Right caused the number of rural abortion providers to drop by more than 50 percent in the decade preceding the publication of *THT*.[50] Anti-women sentiments and conservative religious morality was gaining influence in the political climate; Gilead in the novel is thus the "logical extension" of the agenda proposed by America's fundamentalist Christians in the 1980s, according to Neuman.[51] The character of Serena Joy, for example, has been seen by many to be directly inspired by the real-life Phyllis Schlafly, a conservative spokesperson who told other women to "return home" to their husbands rather than join the workforce.[52] Neuman's text is important to my analysis because it is the only one that dedicates more than a passing reference to the influence of the contemporary conservative political climate on the novel's narrative.

While many analyses of *THT* briefly refer to Gilead as a "patriarchal" state, there is no thorough analysis of a gender-based axis of power and oppression in the text. LeClair says that seeing Gilead as a feminist dystopia is only the "emergent part of the iceberg";[53] Coutard-Story says that a reader who only looks at the novel as "a criticism of patriarchal system ... misses most of the novel's quality";[54] and yet when Joels says that most criticism "focuses" on the "hyper-patriarchy" in Gilead, he must only mean "acknowledges", as outside of the aforementioned substantial analysis on language and

50 Susan Faludi. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1991. p415.

51 Neuman 857.

52 Ibid 860.

53 LeClair 85.

54 Francoise Coutard-Story. "Desire in The Handmaid's Tale." *The Handmaid's Tale, Roman Protéen: Conference de Margaret Atwood.* Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1999. p69.

storytelling, most of the secondary literature does not sufficiently engage with the topic of patriarchal oppression. Rather than look at patriarchy in terms of its influence on language, I will look at it in terms of discipline. My analysis will build on Neuman's paper and those quoted above that say the novel is anti-feminist in order to extrapolate both text and its political context into a broader theory of how disciplinary patriarchal forces, understood in Foucauldian terms, influence both Offred in the text and the text of *THT* itself. My argument acknowledges that while a simplified concept of patriarchy may only be the 'tip of the iceberg' of *THT*, the novel's interaction with the larger patriarchal forces that shaped it mean that the concept of 'patriarchy' is of crucial importance to understanding the text through its context, and vice versa.

This political contextualization is necessary within the broader goal of using fiction to understand the experiences of those who have been marginalized because, as Hogsette points out, the "Historical Notes" of the epilogue tell us "how *not* to read" Offred's narrative.[55] Professor Pieixoto has his own motivation for Offred's text, that of understanding the society of Gilead, and he dismisses as insignificant Offred's description of her subjective experience. The historian who ignores subjective narratives privileges those stories constructed by power and will only ever have a one-sided perspective of oppression. Hogsette says storytelling as a political act requires a receptive audience to successfully counter power. My role as reader is thus, in Hogsette's words, to "make a sincere effort to become a member of the appropriate audience," for without such active participation, "women's voices will be politically and historically silent. In that silence lurks oppression, subjugation,

55 Hogsette 276. Emphasis added.

and ultimately absence”[56]—silenced as when, at the start of Reagan’s second term in 1986, it was the first time in nearly a decade that not one woman ranked high enough in the American government to attend the White House’s daily senior staff meetings.[57] It is such historical, social, and political context, as discussed above, that I will use to assume the role of Hogsette’s “appropriate audience” of the novel, but at the same time, Offred’s—and thus Atwood’s—voice must nonetheless be central to any reading of the (con)text of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

56 Hogsette 277.

57 Faludi 257.

Chapter 2 – Atwood's Voice and the Genre of Dystopia

The best way to centre Atwood's voice in any interpretation of *The Handmaid's Tale* is to see what she has to say about it. If my goal is to understand the historical realities of patriarchal oppression, the first thing I should do in my thesis is listen when a woman speaks about her oppression by men. Atwood says that she set out to write *THT* as a literary dystopia,[58] as such the text operates within certain conventions of the genre. As Atwood was an PhD candidate in literature before she was a commercially successful writer, she took the thorough and well-read approach of an academic to the genre of dystopia. In a conference on *THT*, Atwood said she prepared to write it by reading many of the utopian and dystopian canonical texts: Thomas Moore's, Jonathon Swift's, and George Orwell's, among others.[59] That Atwood sought them out for inspiration is reflected in the meticulous details of Gilead. Atwood's theory of the societies in literary utopias and dystopias, which she says often blend together,[60] is that they must be intentionally "arranged" by a master plan that takes possession of and manipulates all of the following: "money/material goods, environment (pretty or pollution), clothing, sex/reproduction, power/who holds it, and punishment/correction."[61] That Atwood intended *THT* to be a literary dystopia is without a doubt; she chose to

58 Margaret Atwood. "I'm Margaret Atwood, author of The Handmaid's Tale, and executive producer of the Hulu original series based on the novel premiering April 26." https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/5y91f5/im_margaret_atwood_author_of_the_handmaids_tale/ Accessed May 30, 2017.

59 Atwood Genesis 11.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid 12.

channel her experiences of gender marginalization into a literary dystopia. The conventions of the genre of the historical text, as both dystopia and literature, can thus be said to be forces that have shaped *THT*. In *Section 2.i*, I will examine what the dystopian genre means for the text, and in *Section 2.ii*, I will explore the qualities of the text as subjective fiction.

2.i – **The Value of Dystopia**

As both the term dystopia and its literary genre grew out of the utopian tradition, it is best to start there. The term “utopia” began with Thomas More's book of the same name. Based on a Greek pun, the concept was conceived to be a place (*topos*) that is both good (*eu*) and non-existent (*ou*).[62] This pun positions utopia as both a moral exercise and imaginative endeavour. It proposes to answer the question 'what is a good society?' in the form of a thought experiment. Starting from their very nomenclature, utopias were a literature of political engagement.

Political "Utopianism functions like a microscope," says Segal in one of the more popular definitions of the term, "by first isolating then magnifying aspects of existing non-utopian societies allegedly needing drastic improvements.”[63] This magnification allows elements of the “political, economic, cultural, and psychological mainstream” to be analyzed. Many perceive that utopias are about predicting and critiquing possible futures, but Clark says utopias are "about evoking the deepest of our past and present

62 Fátima Vieira. “The Concept of Utopia.” *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Ed. Gregory Claeys. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

63 Howard Segal. *Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities.* Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, 2004. pxi.

experiential realities" as much as "about envisioning future possibilities".[64] Czigányik, however, says utopias as well as dystopias, give the “false impression of claiming to describe the political and social conditions of the future”; instead they are only fictional realities, but ones that "reflect[] on the present social-political context of the author".[65] Utopias, while seemingly looking forward, have long been both enabled and limited by the social and political forces that influence the author in their time and place.

As the Hegelian ‘fact’ of historical progress was proven to be a fiction of its era by the tragedies of the 20th century, political ideologies shifted, and writers began to write novels that critiqued the idea of utopianism. This is what Sargent calls the anti-utopia.[66] Karl Popper, Jacob Talmon, and others criticized the utopian impulse for being inherently dystopian.[67] Claeys paraphrases their point that extrapolating the desire to create a perfect society to its conclusion requires "punitive methods of controlling behaviour which inexorably results in some form of police state."[68] *THT* is an anti-utopia because the society of Gilead was created under utopian-designs; people like the Commander wanted to fix the problems of the previous society, like the fact that when couples choose each other and when women had the right of consent, birthrates were declining. Despite its founders’ utopian hopes, life in Gilead looks dramatically worse for most readers’ than their own political contexts in contemporary North America. The extrapolation of utopianism is sometimes totalitarianism. As

64 J.P. Clark. “Anarchy and the Dialectic of Utopia.” *Anarchism and Utopianism*. Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2009. p20.

65 Zsolt Czigányik. “Utopianism: Literary and Political.” *Utopian Horizons*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016. p8.

66 Lymen Tower Sargent. “Ideology and Utopia: Karl Mannheim and Paul Ricœur”. *Utopian Horizons.* 2016. p33.

67 Gregory Claeys. “The Origins of Dystopia: Wells, Huxley, and Orwell.” *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Cambridge, 2010. p108.

68 Ibid.

Atwood says, utopias are usually consensual; dystopias are dictatorships.[69] This is why Gilead is also a dystopia, meaning ‘bad place’, which has a lot of overlap with the term anti-utopia. Claeys and Booker suggest that one person's ideal dream, or utopia, may be another person's nightmare, or dystopia, depending on one's perspective of the outcome.[70] Many utopias, then, are often dystopias, and vice versa. It is for this reason that Atwood coined the term “ustopia” for the sorts of places that embody the dialectical relationship between utopia and dystopia.[71] Gilead may be such a place. For the narrator, a librarian who was enslaved to produce children, and most other women, Gilead is an oppressive regime. For the religious fanatics, however, like the Aunts and Serena Joy, and for the powerful men, like the Commander, Gilead appears to be exactly what they wanted. Nonetheless, Atwood’s criticism of the utopian dream that led to Gilead is especially apparent in this latter group who have their moments in the narrator’s presence where they resent the changes of Gilead. It is to this extent that *THT* is decidedly a dystopia.

What dystopias have in common with utopias is that both have been said to funnel their present context into the text. Booker says that rather than being escapist entertainment, dystopias “participate in reality in an active and productive way”.[72] Claeys repeatedly uses phrases like "mirrored in refracted realities" and the "extrapolation of some existing trend".[73] Armbruster uses the exact same phrase when describing Gilead, saying it is “only an extrapolation

69 Atwood Genesis 11.

70 Claeys OoD 108, and.

M. Keith Booker. *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature*. London: Greenwood Press, 1994. p10.

71 Margaret Atwood. *In Other Worlds: SF And the Human Imagination.* Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2011. p233.

72 Booker 21.

of trends already seen in the United States".[74] All texts participate in reality to a certain extent, but because of their intentional engagement with the ideas of politics and society, dystopias draw attention to political facts. Atwood herself proclaimed that her novel was simply taking what was being said by a growing religious conservative movement—that women belonged at home, for instance—and showed what it would look like if those those views were forced on others.[75] This representation is a kind of reflection and refraction of political forces. Definitions from many theorists return to the idea that dystopias like *THT* engage with their contemporary societies. Perhaps even more so than other texts, dystopias reflect their present historical context.

Because utopian and dystopian literature can capture the forces of an age in still life, so to speak, they have often been defined in terms of the emotional climate of the society. Atwood has said that utopias channel our hopes while dystopias reveal our fears.[76] Claeys has put utopias and dystopias on opposite ends of a spectrum, with societies of peace and happiness on one side and of anxiety and paranoia on the other.[77] It is perhaps telling that just as the trend in utopian literature gave way to a trend in dystopian literature as the hope of modernity was overcome by the fear of totalitarianism, the trend of feminist utopian literature that grew out of the strides made by the women's liberation movement in the 60s and 70s quickly became a trend of feminist dystopias during the 80s with the rise of the New Right in America, with *THT*

73 Claeys OoD 109.

74 Jane Armbruster. "Memory and Politics: A Reflection on The Handmaid's Tale." *Social Justice, Vol 13, No 3, 1990. np.*

75 Margaret Atwood. "The Handmaid's Tale: Author Q&A." http://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307264602&view=printqa Accessed May 30, 2017.

76 Atwood Genesis 11.

77 Claeys DNH 8.

being the most prominent example among them.[78] The growing number of dystopias in popular literature depicting "the future as nightmare" is "one of the most revealing indexes to the anxieties of our age," said Hillegas in 1974.[79] In the decade before *THT* was written, the anti-women sentiment of the extreme right was beginning to influence American mainstream politics; government Medicaid funding for legal abortion was revoked, creating conditions that "effectively eliminated freedom of choice for most teenage girls and poor women".[80] In the same period, sex-related murders of women rose 160 percent even as the overall homicide rate was declining.[81] Between 1977 and 1989, 77 family-planning abortion clinics were torched or bombed by Christian extremists in the United States.[82] Many women in America with unwanted pregnancies faced what surely felt like the worst case scenario: have your body enslaved to produce a child against your will, or risk being murdered for trying to reclaim your agency. When Atwood wanted to respond to these sorts of developments in a novel, she chose to use the genre of dystopia for its ability to reflect and critique present realities, and thus these are the sorts of fears that became manifest in fictional physical form in the nightmare of Gilead.

2.ii – **Dystopia as Subjective Fiction**

The emotive and subjective qualities of fiction provide dystopias with their strength to engage with reality from angles not available to typically

78 Ibid 475.

79 Mark Hillegas*. The Future as Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the Antiutopians.* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974, p3 . Quoted in Booker DIL 16.

80 Neuman 860.

81 Faludi xvii.

82 Ibid 412.

objective accounts. Arendt discusses the ability of subjectivity to describe historic realities. To write about historic wrongs, like the marginalization of women's voices in political decisions about their own bodies, objectively, "*sine ira*", without anger, as Arendt says, quoting the Roman historian Tacitus, is actually to condone it.[83] This is exactly what the fictional historian Professor Pieixoto does at the end of *THT* when he says he seeks "not to censure but to understand" the atrocities committed by Gilead.[84] His neutrality is a form of permissive acceptance of what Gilead did to women. If he truly wanted to understand the nature of power and oppression, he would have found more value in Offred's subjective narrative, as this essay seeks to do in Atwood's subjective narrative. In discussing the concrete manifestations of Nazi totalitarianism, the concentration camps, Arendt goes on to say that a description of the camps as "hell on earth is more 'objective', that is, more adequate to their essence" than an analysis that remains purely fact-based. Comparing America to Gilead may be the most accurate way to express the marginalization felt by women in society. In using the phrase "hell on earth" to describe the concentration camps, Arendt reveals the strength of metaphor to communicate the subjective nature of a reality, which was long thought throughout the Enlightenment to be best understood by so-called objectivity. But where else did the objectivity of the Enlightenment lead but to the whole bureaucratic and scientific apparatus, including the telegraph and the train, that re-arranged a seemingly utopian society into a machine of death for the Jews, Roma, homosexuals, and others of Nazi Germany? 'Neutrallity' stands on the sidelines while 'objectivity' fails to consider the human consequences. To

83 Hannah Arendt. Quoted in George Kateb. *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil.* New Jersey: Roman and Allanheld, 1984, p52.

84 Atwood THT 284.

counter the twin, pseudo-scientific forces of neutrality and objectivity, one has to seek out a *scientia*, knowledge, which comes from subjectivity.

If one's desire is to critique the status quo, which is the principle intentionality of the dystopian literary genre, neutrality is impossible and objectivity is ineffective. Subjective responses, especially those from the margins subjected to the power of the mainstream, is actually preferable.[85] There is in fact an inverse power, located in the margins, that has an ability to critique the power of the centre. The subjective experiences of those who have been advantaged will tend to support the status quo of society because they see society as a kind of utopia. By contrast, the subjective experiences of those who have been disadvantaged, marginalized, or oppressed are inherently a criticism of the status quo because they are those who will see society as a kind of dystopia. As discussed earlier, many literary critics have done a reading of *THT* that evaluates the ways in which the subjectivity inherent in storytelling is an act of feminist resistance against Gilead. The subjectivity in Offred's—and thus also Atwood's—narrative, by its having been spoken aloud and recorded, is a threat to mainstream patriarchal bias(es) in the culturally accepted definitions of truth in Gilead and America. In this regard, the stories of those who are marginalized have the ability to challenge and expand our understanding of reality. Tompkins, a feminist New Historicist, has argued that looking at non-standard sources for historical understanding, such as literature, may be the best way to come to a more accurate picture of those facets of society which have been marginalized by mainstream approaches to historiography.[86] Literary dystopias are particularly valuable when written by

85 Allen 258.

86 Jane Tompkins "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History." *The New Historicism Reader.* Ed. H. Aram Veeser. Routledge: New York, 1994. p216.

those who have been marginalized in some manner by society because their texts will reveal society as seen from a position that is on the periphery.

Furthermore, literature as 'fiction'—that label on the spines of some books that indicates to the world that there is no truth to be found inside—is able to push the boundary of what can and cannot be said. To the extent that a cultural discourse has norms that impose limits, fiction is a genre of cultural discourse with fewer, or at least different, limits imposed on it. A story that uses 'real' people's names, for example, could find itself financially liable for defamation in America. In order to show the world that would become reality if conservative spokeswomen like Phyllis Schafly got what they wanted, her name was changed to Serena Joy. Even further, by not prescribing to the depiction of the actual, according to Ranciére, literature has the ability to say what is not usually sayable.[87] Only through metaphor can America be compared to a patriarchal totalitarian regime. For this reason, Ranciére says that literature as fiction has a unique ability to engage in "a polemical common world".[88] Dystopias as literary texts can more freely push at the bounds of discourse than those texts which more intentionally engage with the actual. This is why literary studies has been of particular interest in feminist post-colonial discourse, which has looked at writing's role in both reinforcing and challenging cultural norms.[89] If what is typically sayable is produced and reproduced within mainstream norms, fiction as a form of discourse with fewer limits allows those on the margins to more easily challenge a normative perception of reality.

87 Jacques Ranciére. "The Politics of Literature". *SubStance* 33(1), 2004. p10.

88 Ibid.

89 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "On Literature." A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present. Cambridge: Harvard. 1999.

The subversive potential of literature is helped by its emotive, empathy-inducing quality. It possess a unique “vividness, immediacy, and intensity” that many other kinds of historical texts lack, says Claeys in his analysis of the power of literature to respond to real life dystopias.[90] Claeys emphasizes his point by drawing attention to a quote usually attributed to Stalin, “One death is a tragedy; a million is a statistic.”[91] Because stories are “always about an individual”, returning to Atwood,[92] readers are able to empathize alongside protagonists that experience tragedy in a way they cannot empathize with statistical reports. While the indirect experience of reading will never be the same as firsthand experience, one of Benjamin’s theories of literature says that writers can turn their experience into the experience of their audience.[93] When the Aunt’s say that a women’s purpose in life is to produce children—and in Gilead, their words have a tangible force—it is through Offred’s narrative that we empathize with a person who has had her agency removed by a purpose dictated from without. When we read *THT*, we empathize with Offred and come to understand her subjective experiences.

By combining fiction techniques like analogy, satire, and thought experiment, which are commonly used in political discourse, dystopias like *THT* explore challenging social and political issues in powerful ways. It does this through what Suvin calls “cognitive estrangement”, which is a “defamiliarizing strategy of revealing evils in society through shocks of recognition”.[94] The name ‘Offred’ horrifies readers when they learn that the name they came to

90 Claeys DNH 269

91 Ibid.

92 Atwood, quoted in Claeys DNH 269.

93 Walter Benjamin. Quoted in Booker DIL 22.

94 Darko Suvin. Quoted in Booker DIL 176.

know the narrator by is actually that of her commander—she is literally “of Fred”—but is this any different from the pressures on only one gender in contemporary society to change their last name to match that of their partner if they get married? By engaging with and then slightly twisting social issues, *THT* creates a sense of estrangement, of suddenly being distanced from a familiar idea, which allows it to be evaluated in a new and critical light.

Dystopia has persevered and even grown as a genre not simply because it involves both literature and social criticism, but, because as both, it can do something neither can do alone: “Its ability [is] to illuminate social and political issues from an angle not available to conventional social theorists and critics,” says Booker.[95] Literature’s emotive, challenging, and subjective nature give it a “subversive political potential” that mainstream discourse can lack.[96] This is especially important when it comes to literature, like *THT*, that seeks to critique political realities, and thus its persuasive and subversive power is of particular significance to its goal.

95 Ibid 175.

96 Booker DIL 22.

Chapter 3 – Fiction that Critiques Reality

It can be seen from the above that Atwood firmly placed *The Handmaid's Tale* in the genre of dystopian literature, and as such, the story occupies a powerful and complex space in our consciousness for its combination of political subject matter, reflection of the present, extrapolation of social trends, emotive weight, subjective voice, and subversive position on the margins. However, this begs the question from the opening of my thesis: how can that which is supposedly fictitious tell us something about the world of facts?

The first great trend in using literature to help illuminate politics involved considering a fictional work to be an illustrative example of politics in metaphor or in practice, according to Whitebrook.[97] Even those who thought literature was of no use to the pursuit of knowledge still inadvertently acknowledged that carefully applied literary devices can help reveal reality. For example, despite Plato's rejection of poetry for its lack of truth-value, he nonetheless turned to the poet's toolbox when he used the allegory of the cave to illustrate metaphysical and epistemological concepts. The most straightforward and no less legitimate reading of *THT* views Gilead as a naturalistic depiction of a theocracy in the United States. The novel attempts to show what it would be like to live under a regressive, Puritan Christian regime in 1980s America. Literary dystopias can improve our understanding of the factual world despite their label as fiction. This is perhaps even truer when those facts relate to politics. "Politics is not a science," says Ricœur, "it is an art of orienting oneself

97 Maureen Whitebrook. "Politics and Literature". *Politics,* 15(1), 1995. p56.

among conflicting groups."[98] If navigating and understanding the hard reality of politics is an art, it is possible other forms of art can aid in this endeavour. Phillips has observed that literature "as much as science or philosophy" has "set a standard for the knowledge we think we can have of the world".[99] Literature can no doubt play a role in illustrating political realities, but how does it do that?

In *Section 3.i*, I will first ask, if fiction is not bound to the same norms as discourse of the actual, as discussed above, how does it communicate something about the objective world? Second, in *Section 3.ii*, I examine how literary dystopias, like *THT*, supposedly fictions that spring wholly from the author's imagination, can meaningfully criticize political realities. Third and finally, in *Section 3.iii*, I will analyze the text's historical context to ask, what is *THT* critiquing?

3.i – **Literature as Metaphor for Reality**

I will start by distinguishing between the world of the real and the collection of information about it that we assume to be true, called facts. The two are not the same. What goes on in the world of the real must first be filtered into language before it becomes fact, and there is an inherent discrepancy between language and empirical reality. For example, I turn to the line from the opening page of *THT* on which Offred describes the gymnasium in which the handmaids are being trained; she says, "Dances would have been held here; the music lingered, a *palimpsest* of unheard sounds."[100] A palimpsest

98 Paul Ricœur. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia.* Columbia University Press: New York, 1986. p179.

99 Mark Phillips. "Macaulay, Scott, and the Literary Challenge to Historiography". *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 50 (1), 1989. p133.

100 Atwood *THT* 3. Italics added.

is literally a peace of writing material which has been re-appropriated and written over. In the diegeisis of the novel, the gymnasium is not *literally* a piece of writing material for the music of the past, but the metaphoric comparison nonetheless communicates a fact about the school gym being reused for another purpose. Derrida takes this concept of words as metaphor one step further by saying that even the literal meaning of the most basic words in our lexicon, like 'home', is a form of metaphor at least one step removed from reality.[101] To begin with then, all facts are only verbal and human metaphoric interpretations of reality—albeit, ones that are considered to have some form of truth value.

If all language is metaphoric, let us next consider this in the context of Ricœur's theory of metaphors on which his literary theory is based. It is Ricœur's theories that will be most useful here not only because his writings on utopia are considered by Sargent to be paramount to understanding the role of utopia in critiquing ideology,[102] which will be discussed in the next section, but because his literary theory focuses on the capacity of metaphors to describe reality. His theory of metaphors can be summed up with reference to his distinction between "dead" and "live" metaphors.[103] The word 'palimpsest' was used in the previous paragraph because it is also an example of a dead metaphor. Dead metaphors have entered our lexicon; they have gained denotative definitions; and Derrida would say that all language is dead metaphors. The word 'palimpsest' now has an additional defined meaning of "something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier

101 Derrida 32.

102 Lymen Tower Sargent. "Ideology and Utopia". *Political Ideologies.* Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2013. p445.

103 Valdes 265.

form".[104] By contrast, a live metaphor is one that has been recently created and is not defined in any dictionary. Live metaphors can be more potent than dead ones because they, like literature, are more emotive,[105] but they can also be less efficient because they rely on ongoing interpretation rather than prescribed meaning.[106] Ricœur's argument is that the reliance on live interpretation is the only difference between metaphors and other statements.[107] This means that there is both a freedom and a responsibility in the task of interpretation, and, as Cavell points out, any paraphrase of a metaphor, which is to say the way a metaphor is understood through other words, is only approximate and not the same as the metaphor itself.[108] The tension, Derrida's trace,[109] between the word and the reality in dead/defined metaphors is exacerbated in living/interpretive metaphors along another axis by a wide variety of possible paraphrases. This is why Ricœur emphasizes that it is the job of the reader not only to bring forward the historicity of the writer and reader into any interpretation of a work,[110] but also to let the text speak for itself while interpreting a metaphor.[111] Despite these challenges, once a metaphor has been understood, that interpretation is "in exactly the same position as other utterances with respect to the truth".[112] A live metaphor therefore functions like a fresh neologism that pushes discourse further by

104 Google.com defition of "palimpsest", accessed May 28, 2017.

105 Valdes 265.

106 Dabney Townsend. "Metaphor, Hermenuetics, and Situations". *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur.* The Library of Living Philosophers: np, 1995. p202.

107 Ibid 201

108 Stanley Cavell. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969. p76.

109 Derrida 7.

110 Valdes 270.

111 Townsend 194.

112 Ibid 201.

contributing “appropriate philosophical language” to help interpret reality.[113] To sum up in Ricœur's own words, a metaphor has the ability to tell us “something new about reality.”[114]

Ricœur's writing on metaphor was not initially applied to entire literary works, but any illustrative comparison can be considered to be a kind of metaphor, according to his theory,[115] and Valdes later extrapolated Ricœur's work on metaphor to apply to whole literary texts with Ricœur's ultimate approval in response.[116] Likewise, his work on utopia was also not initially applied to literary utopias, but Sargent suggests that it has applications in this area.[117] I will here combine these two theories to apply them to literary dystopias when they are constructed as *THT* in the fashion of an anti-utopia.

3.ii **– “Ustopia” as Political Criticism**

Literary dystopias can take on Ricœur's metaphoric function and tell us something new about reality. One way that they do this is by creating an anti-utopian critique of the utopian assumptions at the core of another’s ideology. In his political theory, Ricœur has argued that one of the challenges of judging an ideology is that it will only ever be judged from the position of another ideology. In this way, he and I both use the word ‘ideology’ to refer to the all-encompassing world view that each of us must invariably posses. For this reason, it is better to think instead of the term ‘ideologies’ because no two people or the same person from moment to moment lives within the exact

113 Mary Gerhart. “The Live Metaphor”. *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur.* The Library of Living Philosophers: np, 1995. p216.

114 Valdes 265.

115 Gerhart 221.

116 Valdes 266.

117 Sargent IU 440.

same ideological perspective. Perhaps some people, especially those exposed to a plethora of ideologies, are less constrained by ideological blinders than others, but they are nonetheless constrained by their individual ideology that has been constructed at the nexus of multiple ideological forces. Thus arises Ricœurs problem of judging one ideology from within the position of another. The way to get out of this “circularity”, says Ricœur when evaluating an ideology is to “assume a utopia, declare it, and judge an ideology on this basis”.[118] Both Ricœur and Sargent say that extrapolating an ideology into an anti-utopia is one way of critiquing political ideology to help reduce bias and expose the assumptions of another.

To what extent can a fictional utopia act as a critique of an existing ideology? Ricœur considers Mannheim's preposition that the concept of a utopia gives “an immediately perceptible picture” of experience,[119] but he does not evaluate the effect of this picture. Sargent calls this kind of assessment a “thought experiment”,[120] but does not go much further than to simply compare it to the thought experiment of literary utopias. Using their theories as my basis, I propose that devising a “thought experiment” in order create a “picture” to critique an existing ideology is what literary anti-utopias do. Ricœur says that a utopia “contains within itself the whole system of thought representing the position of the thinker in question”.[121] The thought experiment of a utopia takes an ideology, draws out the assumptions at its core, and displays them as a fully-formed society, an anti-utopia in the form of a critique. This allows an ideology to be evaluated on the basis of the type of society it

118 Ricœur 172.

119 Karl Mannheim. Quoted in Ricœur 274.

120 Sargent IU 445.

121 Ricœur 177.

would produce if realized. These literary anti-utopias play the role of Ricœur's assumed utopia. A literary anti-utopia will of course be influenced by the critic's own ideological biases, which I will discuss in the next chapter, but they also reveal the biases and blind spots of the ideology being critiqued.

It is here that literary anti-utopias take on Ricœur's metaphoric function. Although a literary anti-utopia is a fictional construction, it is situated in comparison to the realities of the political ideology it is critiquing. This comparison requires some level of interpretation on the part of the reader, but it then acts to illuminate elements of the ideology previously unseen. This achieves what Jameson calls "the most fruitful" approach to critique a utopian project, which is not to consider its most obvious or overt claims but to judge "what lies in it beyond the very limits of its own social system".[122] The ideal way to critique an ideology is to extrapolate it as far as reasonable into a fictional utopia and ask whether it in fact creates a dystopia. Far from being pure fiction, this thought experiment helps assess political realities. "Literature is written discourse with the capacity to redescribe the world for its reader," wrote Ricœur.[123] In his texts that I have researched, he did not link his theories on utopia with literary utopias, but I propose that Ricœur's literary and political theories together show how a fictional representation of utopia can help a reader come to understand criticisms of an ideology. Importantly, Ricœur also did not evaluate to what extent metaphors can be false, simply stating they can be true or false like any other statement. With this in mind, any political critique in fiction must be interpreted and assessed on the basis of that interpretation. The ideal interpretation is done by both acknowledging the

122 Frederick Jameson, quoted in Sargent IU 446.

123 Ricœur 264.

intentionality of the text, which for *THT* is its manifestation of the genre of dystopia, and considering its position in its historical context. Once *THT* has been interpreted in its context, it will be shown to be far from simply fiction. A literary anti-utopia can function as a living metaphor that illustrates an ideology and asks, if it were used as a social blueprint, for whom would it produce a utopia, for whom a dystopia?

3.iii – What is *The Handmaid's Tale* a Critique of?

At this point in my thesis, that Atwood intended *The Handmaid's Tale* to function as a work of political criticism has been made clear, but what specifically is *THT* a critique of? Religion? Patriarchy? Feminists? For one interpretation of the text, we should simply ask Atwood as many interviewers have. Atwood maintains that the Republic of Gilead is only an extrapolation of trends already seen in the United States at the time of her writing, a view supported by other scholars studying *THT*.[124] Atwood specifies that the novel is not a prediction, but a form of "antiprediction" or cautionary tale, aiming to prevent a future that is not guaranteed, but possible.[125] *THT* is what would happen if "casually held attitudes about women" were taken to their logical end,[126] she said. It is an extapolation of growing ideologies in her contemproary society. The two principle socio-political forces that *THT* is critiquing, as observed by many researchers, is the rise of the New Right and Radical Feminism. Both of these movements were growing in political influence in America in Atwood's era, and both had at their core ideological assumptions

124 Jane Armbruster np, and Hogsette 273.

125 Margaret Atwood. "Margaret Atwood on What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in the Age of Trump" https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-age-of-trump.html Accessed May 26, 2017.

126 Atwood Author Q&A np.

which Atwood exposes. In being, as she says, directly inspired by earlier dystopias, Atwood also responds to the social forces of own her era in North America, and extrapolates them in *THT* in order to critique them.

After the successes of second wave feminism and other movements of the 60s, the status of women came under attack in America due to a backlash from the conservative right. In addition to supporting Reagan's bid for presidency, Jerry Falwell's 'Moral Majority' opposed abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment.[127] In the decade prior to the publication of *THT*, the government was becoming increasingly made up of men; they were increasingly making decisions over women's bodies; and they were being supported by a growing Christian conservative lobby group. Referring to the inspiration for the novel, Atwood says she is just taking at their word what "weird fringe groups" say they're going to do when they come to power.[128] What they say they're going to do represents their ideology. How they could possibly do that is the extrapolation of their ideology into their utopia. *THT* proposes what it would require for such anti-woman sentiments to be made reality. One such fringe group Atwood may be referring to is the Heritage Foundation, which drafted the "Family Protection Act" for Congress in 1981.[129] Not all of the act came to pass, but it nonetheless proposed numerous articles that would have set the United States back decades in terms of the status of women. It proposed to...

> *require marriage and motherhood to be taught as the proper career for girls; deny federal funding to any school using textbooks portraying women in nontraditional roles; repeal all federal laws protecting battered*

127 Neuman 860.

128 Atwood Genesis 10.

129 Faludi 236.

wives from their husbands; and ban federally funded legal aid for any woman seeking abortion counseling or a divorce.[130]

The difference between the governments of the United States and Gilead is only how far they went to implement these sentiments, but both were moving in the same direction: that of limiting a woman's access to paths in life outside of those prescribed as part of motherhood and the propagation of the country's population. The United States's climate of gender-based discrimination was much more passive and less violent than in Gilead, but there were nonetheless extremist elements in America's New Right. Enacting an agenda of control over women by bombing medical clinics, as happened in America, is only one order of magnitude beneath bombing the U.S. Congress for the same reason, as happened in Gilead when the new government took power. Gilead is only the result of a mainstream adoption of the same extremist ideology that was present within the New Right of the 1980s. As Claeys pointed out, the enactment of utopianism requires punitive measures,[131] and as Atwood says, "If they say a woman's place is in the home, which they do say, they're going to have to think of a way of stuffing" them back into the home.[132] *THT* illustrates what those punitive measures look like if the ideology were made into a political reality.

The American New Right and their fictional reflection in the state of Gilead differ in level of severity, but they nonetheless adopted similar tactics. Just as the politically regressive push in the United States was not entirely men, Gilead too used women to oppress other women. The New Right had spokeswomen like Phyllis Shafly who made a career telling other women to

130 Ibid.

131 Claeys OoD 108.

132 Atwood Genesis 10.

stay in the home.[133] This was a class of conservative women who, like the Aunts in Gilead, had no power over men but took up the task of dictating that other women were to follow the path of motherhood and childbearing. In fact, the most senior women in the White House by 1986 were those put in charge of attacking feminism's political gains and dictating rules to women, carrying out what Fauldi calls "the administration's most punitive anti-feminist policies".[134] One example is the appointment of anti-abortion activist Marjory Mecklenburg to the "Office of Population Affairs" where she revoked federal funding from any clinic that even provided information to women about the availability of abortions.[135]

A significant accomplishment of the New Right, led in this endeavour by Phyllis Schlafly, was to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment to the American constitution.[136] The amendment would have prevented discrimination on the basis of gender, and without it, the United States is one of the few countries in the world who has not ratified the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women—along with Iran, the Holy See, and Somalia.[137] From the perspective of one anonymous woman who wrote about the parallels between her real-life Christian extremist community that she escaped from and Gilead from *THT*, the 'Moral Majority' of the 1970s and '80s "effectively took the United States backwards a century policy-wise".[138] Atwood

133 Neuman 860.

134 Faludi 259.

135 Ibid.

136 "Equal Rights Amendment." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equal_Rights_Amendment accessed May 31, 2017.

137 "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention_on_the_Elimination_of_All_Forms_of_Discrimination_Against_Women accessed May 31, 2017.

138 Hattinger. "I Grew Up in a Fundamentalist Cult: 'The Handmaid's Tale' Was My Reality." https://theestablishment.co/i-grew-up-in-a-fundamentalist-cult-the-handmaids-tale-was-my-reality-fae2f77263d9 Accessed May 29, 2017.

had coincidentally visited Afghanistan eight months before the take over of the Taliban and Iran six weeks before the revolution of the Shah.[139] There were those in America who were saying 'It can't happen here', but just as Lewis published his dystopia with that exact name in 1935 warning against totalitarianism,[140] Atwood wrote her own version in 1985 arguing that from a woman's perspective, an anti-woman religious fundamentalism similar to that in Afghanistan and Iran was already growing in conservative circles in America.

The New Right was not the only "weird fringe group" that Atwood was responding to in *THT*, however. Many others have written about Atwood's criticism of feminism. She believed that it too put women on a pedestal on top of which there was not much room to move around.[141] While Neuman argues that the text primarily responds to the anti-woman backlash against feminism in the 1980s, Tolan points out passages that suggest *THT* is also critical of new, utopian developments *in* feminism, which believed women's feminine qualities were inherently better then men's masculinity and proposed that a woman's world would be a better world.[142] Offred and the Aunts both seem to say that pre-Gilead feminists that marched to take back the night got the safety they wanted when Gilead used totalitarian measures to ensure women were safe in the streets. If *THT* is critical of the totalitarian tendencies in the anti-woman sentiment of the New Right, it is equally critical of the same totalitarian tendencies in certain strains of feminism in the 1980s, as I will explore in the next chapter.

139 Atwood Genesis 10.

140 See Sinclair Lewis. *It Can't Happen Here*.

141 Atwood Genesis 17.

142 Tolan 152.

Although there are (male) critics who have emphasized that *THT* does not seem realistic,[143] supposed 'realism' is only one of many ways that fictions interact with the real. Whether or not the New Right taking over America was likely to happen in the way the novel depicts does not diminish *THT*'s interaction with the world of the real in other ways. Whether or not Gilead is realistic, the fear of its potentiality was a very real emotion in women like Atwood. Discussing the gender discrepancy in fears in North America, Atwood says, "Men worry women will laugh at them; women worry men will kill them."[144] Fears are not physical, but they are reflections of reality that become material forces in history. "Dystopias are not necessarily fictional in form," says Levitas, because the fear of destructive elements in society is not a fiction.[145] Representation of emotions is another way that literature helps describe reality. Whether or not the New Right's totalitarian takeover of America was 'realistic' at the time, the fear of it must have been a real social force that moved through society and was captured by *THT*.

Finally, when considering how fictions like *THT* can tell us something about fact, it is important to consider Ruth Ronen's analysis of possible worlds. The worlds in our imagination are not always purely fictional.[146] Ronen's imaginary worlds range from our plans for what we're going to do in the near future all the way to our utopian dreams for the future of society. She differentiates between fictional worlds and other possible worlds on a spectrum of potentiality. Fictional worlds, like most novels, are autonomous and exist in parallel to our own. Possible worlds are best understood in terms of

143 Gorman Beauchamp. "The Politics of *The Handmaid's Tale.*" *Midwest Quarterly,* Vol. 15, No. 1. p13.

144 Margaret Atwood. Commonly attributed. Original source unknown.

145 Ruth Levitas, quoted in Claeys DNH 195.

146 Ronen 5.

ramification; they could actually happen.[147] Not all fictional worlds are equally far removed from possible worlds, however. Ronen says possible worlds are better understood in terms of the "realism" that can be ascribed to them.[148] Atwood has repeatedly pointed out across many interviews that she endeavoured to put nothing into the world of Gilead in terms of its treatment of women that did not already exist in some place or time in the real world. For example, she kept newspaper clippings that she used to make her depiction of a regressive regime realistic, including a news story about contraception being newly outlawed in Romania as well as reports from Canada of fear over the declining birth rate.[149] Atwood was well read on contemporary politics, and this also explains the closeness with which Gilead mirrored the rise of the New Right in the United States. The use of only 'real' material for inspiration for dystopian fiction is what Claeys labels the "Atwood Principle".[150] It is important to point out then that one could analyze *THT* in terms of what Ronen calls "the degree of reliance on reality's resources".[151] This means that *THT* stands out among dystopias for its connection to the real, lying much closer to ramification than parallelism on Ronen's spectrum for possible worlds. I would argue that this connection to the real is not necessary for a metaphoric criticism of reality, but it adds weight to Atwood's criticism of growing political forces in her era. At a time when the oppressions and freedoms of women in the past are newly being evaluated by historians, leading to a re-periodization

147 Ibid 8.

148 Ibid 21.

149 Rebecca Mead. "Margaret Atwood, the Prophet of Dystopia." http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/17/margaret-atwood-the-prophet-of-dystopia Accessed May 30, 2017.

150 Claeys DNH 475.

151 Ronen 27.

of history based on the status of women,[152] Atwood critiques the political movements of her day on the same grounds: how would the society proposed by New Right's ideology treat women?

Turning at last to the social criticisms in the epilogue of *THT*—which critiques not the New Right nor Radical Feminists, but academia—reveals an important discrepancy between the intentionality and unintentionality of the text, which I will discuss in the opening of the next chapter. I have argued in this chapter that the dystopian genre of *THT* can be best understood in terms of intentionality—that is, it is a literary device used by Atwood for a purpose. Gilead is presented as an extrapolation of the assumptions at the core of contemporary ideologies within both the conservative and feminist movements. By showing that such a utopian project is in fact a dystopia for the vast majority of people, *THT* is a criticism of those ideologies. By considering how *THT* functions as a dystopia of its time and place, I have attempted to let Atwood speak for herself through both her text and her interviews. This strategy is necessary to help understand the experiences of a gender which has been traditionally marginalized and silenced by society. My goal so far has been to avoid becoming Atwood's Pieixoto, who would ignore Atwood's voice and silence her by appropriating her text to his own ends. Atwood herself, however, doesn't believe Pieixoto does this disservice to Offred's story. In the next chapter, I will attempt to reconcile what it means when Atwood and her feminist literary critics diverge in their interpretation of the *THT*.

152 See Kelly.

Chapter 4 – Historical Forces and Atwood's Positionality

Speaking to Atwood, rather than speaking for her, involves both asking and listening, both listening and replying. If Atwood's voice is best represented through *THT*'s intentionality as a work of political critique, my reply is to consider the ways in which politics have influenced *The Handmaid's Tale* that even Atwood does not consider.

As discussed in my literature review, several critics have analyzed the "Historical Notes" at the end of *THT* for its unfavourable representation of male-dominated academia and its habit of silencing subjective experiences of oppression in its search for 'objective' facts. Professor Pieixoto makes several sexist comments[153] and doesn't believe Offred's personal tale has much value to reveal truths about the historical state of Gilead. If only she "had the instincts of a reporter or a spy", he laments, she could have copied files from the commander's computer.[154] Furthermore he advises against passing moral judgement on the society of Gilead.[155] All of this reads like a criticism of academia's so-called objectivity, which has sometimes blinded it to the value that subjective, marginalized narratives like Offred's have in revealing oppression.[156] Atwood, however, disagrees with this reading of the epilogue: "Some people are disturbed by the fact that [Offred's story] is an object of

153 Grace 197.

154 Atwood *THT* 292.

155 Atwood *THT* 284.

156 LeClaire 89.

historical study," she says, "but this is human nature. Writing about history is never the same as living it."[157] Interestingly, instead of critiquing academia, she merely intended the "Historical Notes" to serve two purposes within the dystopian genre. She says it was to be both the story of how Gilead came to be and a note of optimism for the ending by showing Gilead does not go on forever, like the comments on Newspeak at the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four.*[158] Many literary critics disagree completely with Atwood's optimism, saying the ending has a note of pessimism because Pieixoto's sexism shows that the patriarchal forces that made Gilead possible have not in fact gone away.[159] Who then is correct?

While various literary critics say the epilogue reveals the patriarchal biases in academia, Atwood says that's just the way things are. What does it mean that Atwood and her feminist readers disagree on the criticism of academia represented in the "Historical Notes"? It doesn't mean much to Atwood. She says that after a text is written, an author has no more relation to it than a dinosaur does to its fossilized footprint.[160] Northrope Frye might say simply that Atwood is not a good critic of Atwood,[161] which implies a literary theory that does not much value what the author intended. The text speaks for itself. Atwood's representation of academia in the "Historical Notes" no doubt came from life. Atwood has spent many years in academia—in fact studying women's literature. It is possible that in what she considered an honest representation of an academic historian also represented the less desirable

157 Atwood Genesis 13.

158 Atwood Genesis 13.

159 Duplay 29.

160 Margaret Atwood. Quoted in Coutard-Story 66.

161 Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957. p5.

elements of academia. The social criticism of academia that is present in the epilogue thus appeared without Atwood's intention. Though she meant the "Historical Notes" to be a point of optimism, the patriarchal forces that make traditional academia biased against women's narratives made their way into the text through Atwood's representation, and she nonetheless ended up writing a negative depiction of academia for many readers. This is just one example of how historical forces, like the specific patriarchal bias in academia of Atwood's time, enter the text through the experiences of the author and are ultimately revealed through the way they have shaped the text. If I want to understand the realities of gender oppression in Atwood's time, there is a value in reading the text within its historical context beyond what Atwood intended.

In *Section 4.i* of this chapter, I evaluate the ability of literature to reflect the political realities of its context. Next, in *Section 4.ii,* I consider what *THT* does not say in order to evaluate its historically situated political positionality. Finally, in *Section 4.iii*, I use *THT* to gain a more nuanced understanding of debates in contemporary feminism by situating the text within them.

4.i – Literature as a Footprint of Political Realities

While considering literature for its ability to be an illustration of political realities works well for evaluating the intentional criticisms built within dystopian fictions, another combination of literary, political, and historical studies later arose that could be applied to almost any literary text. "Literature may be evidence for political history," says Whitebrook.[162] A literary work can't help but be shaped by the politics of its era, and that shape is something the work carries with it. Studying the influence left behind on creative writing by

162 Whitebrook 59.

politics is what Whitebrook calls the “political sociology of literature.”[163] While literature as criticism of politics involves an intentional engagement with political discourse, the political sociology of literature looks at the way fiction passively reflects and even unintentionally responds to the political realities of its time—like the biases in academia depicted in the epilogue of *THT*. As both Mannheim and Ricœur have said, we cannot critique one ideology except from the position of another. This means that Atwood’s criticism of the ideologies of the New Right and feminism are made from within her own ideology, and her text thus carries with it the traces of her ideological views. Rather than looking only at obviously political literature for its critique of society, the approach that I will use in this chapter considers that all literature inherently sheds light on the politics of its time and the ideologies within which it was produced.

There are similarities between Whitebrook's description of the political sociology of literature and the New Historicist approach to literature advocated for by Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt. They say that in order for a writer to produce a literary work, that writer must draw upon their “life-world”, and that life-world will have left “traces of itself” in the writer's achievements.[164] This has grown out of the focus on intertextuality emphasized by Roland Barthes, which diminished the importance of the writer and considered a literary work to be “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture”,[165] but rather than considering only the cultural intertextuality of texts, this method focuses on the political influences on a work. Ricœur's literary theory was also cognisant of this fact as it states that

163 Ibid.

164 Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practising New Historicism.* University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 2000. p12.

165 Barthes 146.

the historical context for a work must be “inserted into the dialectic process of interpretation".[166] Using this theoretical framework, *THT* becomes a way to look into the past that can reveal the influence of the political and social context within which the text was produced.

One of the challenges of considering this approach a method, however, is that it actually lacks a clear methodology. In 1995, Whitebrook said that while this kind of analysis has become more popular, there is little work outside the realm of strictly Marxist or literary critics that expands on the methodology.[167] Indeed, rather than try to create a reusable method to apply to literature, Gallagher and Greenblatt “doubt that it is possible to construct such a system independent of our own time and place and of the particular objects by which we are interested”.[168] They say essentially that every investigation requires its own approach that pays attention to the unique context of both the investigators and the text, as I try to do in this thesis. In other words, my assessment of *THT* must be uniquely constructed to consider the socio-political forces and influences of its era that may have shaped it.

This theory assumes the influence of a supposedly autonomous author on a text is marginal in comparison to the influence of that author's age. The theoretical framework of New Historicism suggests that the “deepest source” of literature comes from the “inner resources of a people in a particular time and place” rather than from an atomized writer.[169] In such a reading, Atwood’s negative representation of the totalitarian impulses of the New Right are not simply read as her fears at work in her brain, but a more social fear that was

166 Eugene F. Kaelin. “Paul Ricœur’s Aesthetics: On How to Read a Metaphor”. *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur.* The Library of Living Philosophers: np, 1995. p266.

167 Whitebrook 59.

168 Gallagher and Greenblatt 2.

169 Ibid 7.

rising in society and that subsequently informed Atwood and thus molded *THT*. The influence of personal factors of an individual writer cannot be ignored—for example, Atwood's gender is significant to any analysis—but to borrow a slogan from second-wave feminism, even the personal is political, and so of course the writer's gender is significant when society is constructed around a gender binary that treats humans differently based on their gender label. This approach is backed up by the theories of Althusser, who says the author is inherently under the influence of political forces that may be unperceivable even to themselves. Althusser's theory suggests that "the individual is largely a social phenomenon" and that the author and the society from which the author comes "cannot be really separated".[170] Using a text in this manner to evaluate social forces may be more appropriate for some studies than for others, but it is particularly relevant for my task of understanding experiences of gender-based oppression through fiction. In this theory, the writer is considered only to the extent that they are the nexus point through which social, political, and cultural forces shaped the text. This means the fact that Margaret Atwood was a white, middle class, woman academic who lived in both Canada and the United States and was 46 at the time of the publication of *THT* is relevant in so much as it reveals the experiences that shaped *THT*. The process also works in reverse; the shape of *THT* will thus reveal truths about those experiences.

The approach proposed in this chapter dramatically reduces the agency of the author by suggesting that their work is more a product of their political realities than even their own whims and desires, but this is because our whims and desires are often created by our political realities. It is fair to say that this socio-politico-historical approach to literature is predicated on a materialist and

170 Louis Althusser. Quoted in Booker DIML 15.

determinist perspective on free will. Not only are an author's choices in writing a text limited by the ideological materialist conditions of their time and place, but their words are actually produced by that context. The author, all authors, are no more than complex computers into which goes the input of all their lives' experiences and out of which, the text is produced. It is through this method that all literature can be read as a cultural-anthropological footprint, not of the author, but of the social, cultural, political, and other forces which converge on the author at the time and place that the text was produced. While this approach can be applied to any text, certain genres of texts may be more fruitful than others depending on the focus of analysis. Political literature like utopias and dystopias, for example, which are defined by their depiction of whole societies, may be best for revealing the political and social influences and limits that are produced on an author's imagination by the author's time and place.

I have here only expanded on the theoretical approach that is often applied to dystopian and utopian texts. The approach that looks at dystopias for reflecting their present means that the text itself is not so much an object of study as it is a method of study. In their analysis of utopias and dystopias, Gordin *et al* suggest that a literary text function as an analytical window into another time and place. For them, utopias and dystopias are actually "historically-grounded analytic categories" that can be used to "understand how individuals and groups around the world have interpreted their present tense".[171] When referring to the individual's interpretation of their present tense, they acknowledge that a given dystopia will have been written with the

171 Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakesh. *Utopia/Dystopia.* Princton University Press: Princeton, 2010. p3.

perspectives and biases of the author, but importantly, the author is considered as part of a social group which will have had an influence on their world view. In this regard, even the author's biases make up a certain form of historically situated reality. While anti-utopias attempt to uncover the unspoken assumptions within a targeted ideology, they no doubt also contain their own unspoken assumptions. Within these assumptions rest the evidence of the context within which the text was produced. Evaluating the influence of socio-political forces on an author mean that anti-utopias as literary texts not only reveal the biases in the utopia they depict, but they carry with them the biases of their own ideological creation.

Even as Atwood uses Gilead as an anti-utopia to critique what she sees as the utopian assumptions at the core of the New Right and feminism, she nonetheless reveals at least as much about her own ideological position. Just as Jameson advocates critiquing ideology by looking at the unsaid assumptions at its core,[172] which is what Atwood does when she considers what it would take for society to force women back into the role of child bearers, I must look at the unsaid assumptions hidden within Atwood's anti-utopia. It is these blind spots within her ideological position that reveal it, and it is her ideological position that reveals the social and political forces that, through her, shaped the text. Having hopefully avoided a criticism of New Historicism of speaking over the author[173] by considering Atwood's intentionality, I will now use an approach inspired by New Historicism to evaluate *THT* for what it reveals about the political climate of its era beyond what Atwood intended.

172 Frederick Jameson, quoted in Sargent IU 446.

173 Marcus 62.

4.ii – What *The Handmaid's Tale* Does Not Say

Looking at the tension between what *THT* says and what it does not say may reveal historically interesting things about Atwood's ideological positionality at the nexus of various social, political, economic, and other forces that shaped the text in in the years leading up to 1985. For a brief example, I will deviate from my gender-based analysis to use an intersectional approach to also consider race and class in *THT*.

Offred, like Atwood, is a white, upper-middle class woman. This is not revealed in contrast to people of other races and classes in Gilead but through what is not contrasted: the fact that her ethnicity and social standing are treated as the norm. All texts inherently normalize those facets of society represented by their narrator, but while a narrative written from the margin reveals social forces through contrast, as Atwood's text does with gender, a narrative written from within the majority is at risk of erasing the existence of the margins.

Which margins *THT* acknowledges and which it erases will help produce an understanding of the social forces that shaped the text. While Offred is positioned within the mainstream of religious and sexual identities, *THT* nonetheless engages with the idea of the persecution of religious and sexual minorities in Gilead. Horrific stories are told of the execution of Catholic priests and homosexuals. Offred empathizes with their plight. The narrative, however, erases—by ignoring—the oppression experienced by race and class in Gilead, and thus America. According to Offred's narrative, we are to assume lesbians and women who had abortions were treated the worst, and all other women

have been treated equally poorly by Gilead regardless of their race or class. Here what *THT* doesn't say shows its ideological bias.

THT does not mention race once. The Marthas are the servant class of women in Gilead who wear green. The only one who is described physically is said to have dark arms—whether from race or outdoor labour, it is unclear.[174] They all also speak in a form of regional dialect that I cannot place in an American context but that indicates they have had a different upbringing from the other women. "Don't call me Ma'am," Serena Joy tells Offred, "You're not a Martha."[175] There is every indication that they are presented as a Black American servant class, as indicative of the horrendous past of the United States, but this notion is neither fully acknowledged nor dismissed by the narrative. By remaining unspoken, ignored, it is instead normalized. When it is revealed later that the Martha's are perhaps at greater risk of being shipped to the work colonies than even the Handmaids, it is not disclosed with a hint of sympathy.[176] The Marthas are in fact often adversarial to Offred's well-being, and only one, excited in a stereotypically motherly way to have a new baby in the house, begins to befriend Offred. This unspoken treatment of race in *THT* reveals a blind spot in the ideological positionality of the text. It shows a complete lack of acknowledgement for the dimension of race in oppression despite the text's depiction of Black characters in positions of oppression.

Even the class-based positionality of Atwood reveals itself in *THT*. The fact that Offred is middle-class creates the distance to oppression that allows what happens in Gilead to be shocking. If what happens in Gilead is shocking to her, it is thus intended to be shocking for us, an assumed middle class reader.

174 Atwood *THT* 9.

175 Ibid 15.

176 Ibid 77.

For some rural lower-class women in American, however, *THT* was not shocking —it was real life.[177] There are still arranged marriages in the most Christian fundamentalist regions of America where a women's sole duty is to produce children. Atwood in fact researched them when preparing to write *THT*. Offred's journey, supposedly through time into a dystopian turn in society, looks instead like a geographic journey from an urban middle-class lifestyle in urban Massachusetts to the rural regions of the religious poor. Offred and thus Atwood are outsiders looking in. I have argued that this may allow the reader to feel emotive empathy for women in such positions, but coming as it does from Offred who has been captured rather than raised within such societies, *THT* radically others the women who are actually born to religious fundamentalism. We see moments of pity for the religious women like the Aunts, when they shed tears over the pain of the transition to Gilead,[178] but they are still presented as the other to be pitied rather than empathized with. Offerd presumes religious women like "the Aunts" to be a homogeneous mass who all wield cattle prods to prevent other women's freedom. The zealous pursuit of anti-abortion laws by some religious women in the United States may have felt to Atwood like religious women wanted to oppress other women, but Faludi's ethnographic interviews with abortion clinic protestors propose that actually it was men who most fervently opposed a woman's right to an abortion in the early 1990s.[179] By portraying the Aunts and other fundamentalist women in Gilead as an homogenous mass, *THT* shows a lack of diversity of religious viewpoints and fails to consider the ways in which religious women themselves may often oppose patriarchal systems but themselves face violent repercussions when

177 Heattinger np.

178 Atwood *THT* 52.

179 Faludi 400-5.

they try. Moira was shown to be beaten for trying to run away from her role as a child bearer at the Red Center in Gilead, but the Aunts likely would have faced the same repercussions if they tried to flee. That the threat of violence for trying to escape one's role as child bearer, as Moira faced, was presented as a new threat to the narrator rather than an ever-present reality reveals the extent to which the text was produced from a relatively non-violent, non-impoverished, and more empowered social position in society.

THT can ideally make us feel sympathy for marginalized voices, but Offred's story makes us sympathetic for a middle-class women newly threatened by encroaching government regulation of her body. It does not make us feel sympathy for some of the most oppressed women in society, those who were raised in deeply patriarchal households. Offred sees them as her enemy. As Spivak argues, "The radically other cannot be selfed."[180] This means that women whose lives are depicted as foreign lands to be visited, as some are in *THT*, have been radically distanced from the subjective narrator and are thus being further marginalized rather than empowered by the narrator's engagement with them. What facets of oppression *THT* acknowledges and what it remains blind to reveal its positionality within various intersecting forces in society.

4.iii – Feminism Within *The Handmaid's Tale*

The positionality of *THT* within various political forces might explain the extent to which the text criticizes feminism. If Offred and Atwood were happy with the world the way it was before Gilead, then feminism is no use for them. For Atwood who was empowered enough in her upbringing to pursue a career

180 Spivak OL 138.

at Harvard, feminism wasn't for her. By referring to two secondary characters as simply feminist without extrapolating the type of feminism they belong to, *THT* reveals an ideological biases that sees feminism as a unified whole that is defined by actions of radical activists. By juxtaposition, Offred does not exist within this monolithic concept of feminism. In *THT* being "feminist" involves burning pornography and marching in the street, as Moria and Offred's mother do; it does not involve writing one's personal story or choosing one's lover, as Offred does in her acts of resistance against Gilead.

The text's criticism of feminism is a reflection of a significant but declining percentage of women in the 1980s who did not call themselves feminists, a plurality which crystallized into the particular character of Offred. Faludi might say that Atwood's criticism of feminism is perhaps a little misguided; according to surveys in the United States taken in the 1990s, less than 8 percent of women "think that the women's movement might have actually made their lot worse."[181] Nonetheless, a survey published in the same year as *THT* in the United States showed that 41 percent of upper-income women and 26 percent of lower-income women did not consider themselves feminist.[182] This data lumps together those women who earn their own income and those women who rely on their partner's income, which would complicate the picture, but it shows that certain socio-economic factors influenced whether or not women considered themselves feminist, and these are the same factors that would have influenced Atwood. Whatever the cause, this survey nonetheless exposes a trend that women with financial power in society, which often goes hand-in-hand with political power and domestic freedom, did not

181 Faludi xv.

182 Faludi xx.

consider the behaviour of feminists like Moira in *THT* something they wanted to be associated with.

Regardless of Offred's rejection of her Mother's brand of feminism, many critics consider *THT* to be a feminist novel. The ways in which the novels is actually feminist is another element that goes unsaid in *THT*. While it is not a self-acknowledged feminist text, and is even critical of "feminism", it is nonetheless situated within certain moods of women's liberation that opposed the patriarchal oppression of women. It exists at a position within feminism that embraces the achievements of past feminism(s) but fears the radical push of present feminism(s). Callaway proposes that Atwood's brand of feminism represented within *THT* is more classically humanist, which makes her closer to the "First Wave and Moderate Feminists".[183] I would argue Atwood is best understood as belonging to Libertarian Feminists in the Second Wave. Writing six years after the publication of *THT*, Sawicki describes Libertarian and Radical Feminists in oppositional terms:

> *Libertarian feminists attack radicals for having succumbed to sexual repression. Since radicals believe that sex as we know it is male, they are suspicious of any sexual relations whatsoever. Libertarians stress the dangers of censoring any sexual practise between consenting partners and recommend the transgression of socially acceptable norms as a strategy of liberation. [...] Radical feminists accuse libertarians of being male-identified because they have not problematized sexual desire; libertarians accuse radicals of being traditional female sex prudes.*[184]

This dichotomy that Sawicki and others have identified in feminism in the 1980s directly informs the depiction of feminists in *THT*. Libertarian or Liberal Feminists largely say that where laws have changed, women are now equal

183 Callaway 21.

184 Sawicki DF 29-30.

with men. Offred is subject to patriarchal oppression to the extent that she is now oppressed by the law differently than men are. To the extent that she seeks freedom as it is defined for men in America—she just wants the freedom to work her job and to choose her family—Offred then is a Liberal Feminist. Women need only the same legal protections as men in order to be free. In Atwood's time, many such legal protections had been put in place. Roe v. Wade legalized Abortion in America in 1972[185] Liberal Feminists were feminists, but they didn't feel much more needed to be done to ensure equality for women, often because they themselves were successful in life.[186] If they had made it, why couldn't other women? It was when the New Right began encroaching on women's legal freedoms that Liberal Feminists like Atwood felt threatened.

While Radical Feminists rejected heteronormative relationships, one of the key arguments of *THT* is that women can feel oppressed when they cannot chose their partner. The whole purpose of totalitarianism in Gilead is to dictate who women must sleep with in order to produce population for society, and Offred's penultimate act of subversion, before she records her story, is to abandon the partner dictated by the state, the Commander, and to choose her own partner, Nick. *THT* is thus critical both of religious conservatives and of Radical Feminists for dictating, on the one side, that women must sleep with men, and, on the other side, that women must not sleep with men. Radical Feminists, like Moira and Offred's Mother, opposed what they felt was a patriarchy. They felt men were largely in control of society and were largely the root of women's oppression.[187] They saw masculinity as inherently toxic, and

185 "Roe v. Wade." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roe_v._Wade Accessed June 2, 2017.
186 Callaway 16.
187 Ibid 20.

they praised womanly qualities in society.[188] As noted by many literary scholars, *THT* is heavily critical of the radical side of feminism when it juxtaposes its practises with the oppressive Aunts: both are women who demanded other women fit their totalitarian definition of femininity and motherhood.[189] As Atwood says, she opposes the tendency of Radical Feminism to put her gender on a pedestal. In its response to the New Right, *THT* too is a "backlash" against recent feminist politics. A certain reading of the text suggests a form of Liberal Feminism that says as long as governments do not become like Gilead and stay out of women's lives, there is no need for feminism. The position of the text within the plurality of feminism(s) of the Second Wave—rather than outside of some monolithic Feminism, like Offred describes—is backed up by my earlier intersectional analysis. Arguments from within Marxist Feminism and later postcolonial and intersectional feminisms criticized Second Wave Feminists for ignoring the roles of class and race in women's oppression. *THT* thus reveals a uniquely articulated positionality in the debates in Second Wave in the 1980s between Liberal and Radical Feminism—the influence on the text of another nexus of socio-political forces.

While one reading of *THT* tells us something about the dialectics within feminism in the 1980s, another tells us about patriarchal oppression. Even though, as argued above, Atwood is not the best writer to turn to when seeking an understanding of class-based oppression or race-based oppression, and even though she criticizes certain strains within feminism(s), she is still a woman who has had certain gendered experiences in a society that is to a certain extent patriarchal. Her text is thus ideal for analyzing the facets of

188 Atwood Genesis 17.

189 Callaway 22.

gender-based oppression in the era leading up to 1985. Atwood herself does not appear to think that Gilead is a strict patriarchy. She says for the novel to be a “feminist dystopia, all the men would have to be advantaged”.[190] Even though her voice in this regard can be set aside with the argument that she is not her own best literary critic, her voice as author cannot be set aside. She is still a person who has experienced gender-based marginalization, and so her voice as the subjective storyteller in the production of *THT* is valuable and indeed necessary to engage with on the subject of patriarchal oppression.

190 Atwood Genesis 16.

Chapter 5 – Understanding Patriarchy Through *The Handmaid's Tale*

At this stage it is important to answer why I'm using the concept of patriarchy to evaluate the relationship between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the socio-political forces of its historical context. Patriarchy is hard to define;[191] it is considered sometimes inaccurate;[192] so why look for it in *THT*?—precisely for those reasons.

Patriarchy is a concept not easily understood from its academic definitions, but the word has nonetheless permeated feminist discourse because it has been needed by those who have experienced gender-based discrimination to describe what they felt. If patriarchy is perhaps better subjectively rather than objectively understood as a term, fictional texts like *THT* are ideal for communicating the experience of patriarchal oppression. When Atwood extrapolated the anti-woman sentiments at the core of the New Right, she was also extrapolating the patriarchal forces that they were influenced by. *THT* is thus not simply a dystopia of the New Right, but it is a dystopia of their patriarchal assumptions made manifest. With reference to *THT*, I will argue that the vast, pervasive apparatus of patriarchal power revealed through the text is best understood in Foucauldian terms, and as such Offred's resistance to Gilead can be evaluated in these same terms.

191 Walby 19.

192 Acker 239.

In *Section 5.i* of this chapter, I will evaluate generally accepted academic definitions of the term patriarchy. In *Section 5.ii*, I will use a Foucauldian definition of patriarchy as a capillaric apparatus of power to examine how patriarchal power is reflected in *THT*. In *Secton 5.iii*, I consider the ways in which *THT* is a dystopia of the patriarchy represented as a totalitarian state in the text. And finally in *Section 5.iv* I evaluate Offred's sites of resistance within this definition of patriarchy.

5.i – What is Patriarchy?

For comparison to the form of patriarchy revealed by *THT*, I will start first with what is commonly understood about patriarchy in Gender Studies. While patriarchy has its uses as a concept, it has not been wholly adopted. Acker's popular critique of the concept 'patriarchy' has problematized its use in feminist discourse, proposing that it might be an inaccurate theoretical concept for understanding the myriad ways in which gender-based oppression is enacted.[193] Acker's gender-based rather than patriarchy-based analysis would be more useful for understanding representations of men's oppression in Gilead, but as fiction is best considered a resource for subjective experiences in society, my analysis of *THT* will remain within the frame of women's oppression. Acker admits that the very phrase 'patriarchy' may have resonated with so many because it has a particularly galvanizing appeal,[194] that is, the term has resonated as a depiction of what gender-based discrimination looks like from a women's perspective. Because a subjective interpretation of patriarchal oppression is what I'm seeking with my analysis, I will herein

193 Ibid.

194 Acker 239.

explore this theoretical concept. Within those who have tackled the subject of patriarchy, Acker points to Walby for best depicting the multifaceted nature of patriarchy.

Patriarchy is often described in generalizations that make it seem like a broad, ahistorical constant. The reality, as Walby argues, by looking at the ways in which patriarchal structures shifted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is that patriarchy is a dynamic and multifaceted, socially-constructed apparatus.[195] Walby evaluates how there are weaker and stronger patriarchal forces that can be more or less oppressive across various structures in society, such as the effect of violence in men's oppression of women and the connection between gender and sexuality. Walby's analysis suggests that term patriarchy is best understood by a broad survey of examples. The myriad ways in which something called patriarchy is inconsistently enacted is one of the reasons that the concept of patriarchy is challenging to articulate. She starts by defining patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women".[196] In using the term "social structures", Walby specifies that she is rejecting notions of biological determinism—women do not engender their own oppression simply because they are physically capable of bearing children; their oppression is forced on them because of patriarchal society's perspective that women are primarily responsible for and their primary responsibility is childbearing and childrearing. It is important to note that in this definition, patriarchy exists as a system regardless of the severity with which men dominate, oppress, or exploit women, so long as it happens to some degree. Whether in Gilead, where

195 Walby 20.

196 Ibid.

women who refuse to bear children for men are sent to toxic work camps, or in the United States, where some women cannot access an abortion because men do not want them to, there is a level of patriarchy at work. So long as there are social structures that dominate, oppress, or exploit along gendered lines, favouring men over women, patriarchy occurs in those systems. Even though some women in Gilead experience less violence and more wealth, the Commander's wives for example, they are nonetheless subject to patriarchal oppression, being imprisoned within the private sphere under their husbands. Walby's exploration of the many social structures of patriarchy is used to show how patriarchy is a "dynamic system",[197] which can be found in society in "more than one form".[198]

With the preceding analysis as evidence, Walby's ultimate argument is that patriarchy is not an "historical constant",[199] but instead changes in both form and degree.[200] For example, bourgeois women in the mid-nineteenth century lived through the peak of the "private form" of patriarchy in which women were most heavily chained to the domestic sphere.[201] After this period, more and more women moved into paid work, which subjected women to a type of patriarchy that was both different in "form" and in "degree" from previous patriarchal structures.[202] Walby concludes that the "main site of control" over women's lives and sexuality has shifted away from husbands and fathers and into the public sphere.[203] Even though patriarchy shifts over time,

197 Walby 173.
198 Ibid 200.
199 Ibid 173.
200 Ibid 194.
201 Ibid 182.
202 Ibid 194.
203 Ibid 197.

however, it is fair to say that it does not shift evenly across time. To the extent that we can generalize with Walby to say that a singular concept of patriarchy has shifted from one form to another in Anglo-American cultures over the past two centuries, it is important to consider that this change would be spearheaded in some areas and would lag behind in others. To the extent that any change can be reduced to a binary of the present and the past, it might be best to think of the transition of patriarchy over time as a dialectic between these two poles, and any facet of society going through this transition is uniquely dialectically constructed between the two poles. That means, as discussed in my introduction, it is more valuable to think of the forces of various patriarchies, within which *THT* is situated, rather than a single monolithic patriarchy that *THT* is either influenced by or free from. And every action of patriarchal influence, including at the site of the text itself, is uniquely situated within these forces in a way that reveals the character of broader patriarchal influences.

5.ii – **Patriarchy as Foucault's Disciplinary Micro-Processes**

As patriarchy has been defined in almost chimeric terms, appearing in many different ways and many different forms, several feminist critics applied Foucault's analysis of power, as dispersed micro-processes, to their experiences of gender-based oppression.[204] Foucault had established his own theoretical framework for the way power functions in society through his

204 Deborah Cook. *The Subject Finds a Voice: Foucault's Turn Toward Subjectivity.* New York: Peter Lang. 1993.

Janet Sawiciki. "Foucault and Feminism" Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate Ed Michael Kelly. Boston: MIT Press, 1994.

Sandra Lee Bartky. "Foucault, Feminism, And the Modernization of Patriarchal Power." *Foucault and Feminisim: Reflections on Resistance.* Ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby. Boston: North Eastern University Press, 1988.

genealogy of sexuality and other works. As a gay man whose sexuality was on the margins of society, he sought to uncover how such power relations that defined “normal” and “not normal” sexualities were reproduced in society. The framework he created thought of power/knowledge as a disciplinary apparatus that exists as a capillaric network of loci of power. For Foucault, power in contemporary society was not some abstract, remote entity; power manifests itself in the physical processes in our day to day lives. Foucault’s theories of power have been widely adopted because his metaphoric description of power as an apparatus is able to redescribe reality in a productive and informative way. Sawicki, Cook, and Bartky all propose that if Foucault’s analysis can help us understand how relations of power marginalize certain sexual activities in society, it can also be used to understand how relations of power marginalize certain genders in society—despite the androcentric nature of Foucault’s original analysis.[205] Foucault’s definition of a power that works across and within all social structures[206] matches Walby’s definition of patriarchy. Foucault’s vision of power as a disciplinary apparatus that functions in all areas of society and that does not repress sexuality but takes control of it for society’s own ends also matches power as envisioned in THT. I propose that if Foucault’s theoretical concept of power can be used to understand patriarchal influences in everyday experiences, it can also be used to pull apart and reveal the forces of patriarchal influence reflected within Atwood’s metaphoric representation of women’s oppression.

Foucault advocates starting one’s analysis by looking at interactions of power at the extreme points, where it is always less codified, but functions

205 Sawicki 359.

206 Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction.* New York: Vintage Books, 1986. p94.

nonetheless.[207] The researcher begins with the infinitesimal mechanisms in which power produces disciplinary norms, for example, at the site of *THT*, and works upward to discover forms of global domination.[208] It may only be possible to come to an understanding of patriarchy as an apparatus of power in terms of its constitutive and material forces at the sites where they actually enact change. Appropriate to this, literature is another area of study for which one comes to understand the plurality through the analysis of particulars, as previously discussed. Using literature and Foucault's method, it is through examining the particular sites where power is enacted within Gilead that patriarchal power can be known. The form of power on which Foucault focused in contemporary society was a "disciplinary power"[209] that creates a "society of normalization"[210] by means of the self-reproducing relationship between power and truth.[211] In THT, one obvious site of this disciplinary power is the Red Center where the Aunts attempt to brainwash the women becoming handmaids.

The Aunts tell all the handmaids that Janine deserved her gang-rape committed by men in the time before.[212] The Aunt's imply that certain behaviours, like women sun-tanning, should be punished by self-deserved sexual violence. "Such *things* do not happen to nice women," the Aunt says.[213] The handmaids begin to internalize this perspective. There is an ironic acknowledgement that Offred herself is beginning to adopt these limits of

207 Michel Foucault. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972-1977.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. p97.

208 Foucault P/K 99.

209 Ibid 105.

210 Ibid 107.

211 Ibid 52.

212 Atwood *THT* 68.

213 Ibid 52. Italics original.

normalized behaviour when she later blames her own body for attracting the Commander only 11 pages after Janine was forced to blame herself for her rape.[214] Society creates a certain 'truth' of what is considered legitimate behaviour for women, and that 'truth' is actually a disciplinary power that attempts to normalize women to a certain standard in Gilead. When the Aunt says women showing off their shoulders deserved the "things" that happened to them, those words sound violent and brutal in the context of the violent society of Gilead that was created by such sentiments. Such sentiments, however, were actually being spoken, and heard, in America at the time. Some men in America were blaming women for their own assaults. "Wife beating is on the rise because men are no longer leaders in their homes," an evangelical minister said when being surveyed in 1982, "I tell women they must go back home and be more submissive."[215] And just like in Gilead, those religious conservatives in 1980s America were using biblical references to justify abuse of women.[216] Those same religiously-justified, victim-blaming sentiments in America shaped the text, appearing in the Aunt's words in Gilead. That *THT* is critical of these perspectives by having them spoken by someone wearing a physical disciplinary tool, a cattle prod, at her belt is indicative of *THT*'s positionality in relation to these social forces. The Red Center is only an extreme manifestation of the sorts of patriarchal disciplinary pressures that existed in the era of the text.

THT reveals that the apparatus of patriarchal power is so pervasive that even women, like the Aunts, reproduce norms of patriarchal power over other

214 Ibid 77.

215 Carol Virginia Pohli, "Church Closets and Back Doors: A Feminist View of Moral Majority Women," *Feminist Studies,* 9 no 3, (Fall 1983): 542. Quoted in Faludi 233.

216 Dan Morgan. "Evangelicals: A Force Divided, Political Involvement, Sophistication Growing," *Washington Post,* Mar 8, 1988. p. A1. Quoted in Faludi 233.

women, but Foucault further shows how people can impose power on even their own lives when it becomes a self-correcting form of discipline. He envisions society as Bentham's panopticon in which all people are watched, but do not know when or from where they are being watched, and so they begin to police themselves.[217] In the panopticon, "each comrade becomes an observer".[218] The handmaids in Gilead do not know which of the others is secretly aligned with the patriarchal state. They must mimic the prayers of their state-religion to each other until they can share a code word, "May Day", and discover that they are actually each other's ally. There is, however, the threat, described by Fraser, of a panopticon that becomes so entrenched, so effective, that it is in fact invisible and internalized.[219] This is what Bartky calls the "panopitcal male connoisseur [that] rides within the consciousness of *most* women".[220] Bartky builds on Foucault's analysis to describe how women can feel a constant pressure to look aesthetically appeasing to patriarchal beauty standards, for example, by correcting their posture to appear thinner even when no men are looking. The correction of the handmaid's posture, to sit up straight, by the Aunts seems much more severe in Gilead, but, as Barky argues, despite "the lack of formal sanctions" for women's posture in contemporary times, a woman who does not submit may still face repercussions. Indeed, despite women's capability of providing for themselves, they are often warned they need to find a husband to provide for them, implying that if they do not, they will be left destitute. In the 1980s, with social programs slashed and abortion declining in availability, this was actually a reality for many women.

217 Foucault P/K 158.

218 Perrot interviewing Foucault P/K 152.

219 Fraser UP 49.

220 Bartky 72. Italics added.

Single mothers were disproportionally represented in the lower classes.[221] The threat to women's livelihoods caused by not looking attractive to men was a force that had real and physical consequences for some women. If your husband leaves you, you will end up poor, they were warned. That both Offred in Gilead and many women across America would find themselves destitute if they were denied the patronage of their head of household, was not a coincidence.

Foucault argues that power can only become so pervasive if it is self-reproducing, and it is only self-reproducing if it is productive. That is, power must also produce positive results at every nexus point for it to be reproduced. Bartky argues that looking attractive to men helps women climb social ladders.[222] Patriarchal standards of beauty are productive for women who adopt them within a patriarchal society. The pressures on Offred are not simply to dress a certain way, however, but to be a mother, and patriarchal standards of women's behaviour apply even there. Offred acknowledges that she is treated better than some women because she is able to be a mother. Some other women are jealous of the handmaids. Being a handmaid is productive for Offred because it allows her to avoid working in labour camps, and so she goes along with society's expectations. Domination is built on a reciprocal relation of production.[223] Society is constructed in such a way that submitting to patriarchal power is often easier than going against it.

Gilead's form of patriarchal power is best understood in these Foucauldian terms. It is a disciplinary power so pervasive that even Offred begins to internalize and accept the new social norms being imposed on her. How does

221 Faludi xvii.

222 Bartky 77.

223 Foucault P/K 203.

this illuminate patriarchal realities of the context of the text? The difference between America in the 1980s and Gilead is only that the latter is a more violent and totalitarian reflection of the same patriarchal forces that pervade and reproduce within contemporary society.

5.iii – Gilead as a Totalitarian Metaphor

Despite the similarities between the treatment of women in America and Gilead, there are stark differences. Offred does not live in a democracy but in a totalitarian state. The forces of power that dictate the roles and limits of her gender can be described as coming from above much more so than from below: from the Commander, from the Eyes, and from the state. How does *THT* redescribe patriarchal forces in Atwood's world, which had a far less totalitarian government than Gilead? One way that it does this is through the dystopian literary genre.

The pressure on women to have children seems innocent enough within the liberal world view, but those pressures are much more tangible in the lives of those who feel them. *THT* as a dystopia extrapolated the assumptions at the core of religious conservatism in the United States and made manifest the pressures those assumptions put on women. A woman who wants but cannot access an abortion is not subject to mere a disciplinary restraint, like correcting one's posture; she is forced to carry a child. Society has normalized women's role as an unpaid child-bearer and domestic labourer. Women who go along with this path are rewarded with male patronage, but those who go against it feel the extent of patriarchy's disciplinary mechanism. Many women have been manipulated and coerced to varying degrees into becoming child bearers for the patriarchal state, and the denial of access to abortion can actually force

women to become “walking wombs” beyond their choice. Patriarchal forces actually have a very tangible and totalitarian-like influence on women’s lives. If those pressure were really felt by women in Atwood’s era, perhaps American society in the 1980s was much more totalitarian than has been understood by the mainstream/male-stream.[224]

Gilead actually has more in common with a dystopian extrapolation of patriarchal forces than the real-life examples of totalitarianism in the twentieth century that Atwood had been exposed to. In Gilead, there is no cult of personality for the head of the state. The Republic supposedly has a centralized government, as the Commander describes, but there is no figurehead, merely a collection of nameless masterminds and the invisible Eyes, the secret police, that enact their will. That there is no literal patriarch may make Gilead more like contemporary patriarchy. Rather than reflecting merely the executive power of the Nazi state, Gilead functions in *THT* as a dispersed intangible apparatus exerting force on the lives of characters. Bartky argues power now controls women’s bodies in a “bureaucratic mode—faceless, centralized, and pervasive”.[225] If a single patriarch could be blamed, patriarchy would be better understood in terms of typical top-down power arrangements of the liberal humanist world view. In order for the pervasive power structures of patriarchy to be made manifest to a liberal reader who has not experienced them, a literary dystopia could be used. *THT* reveals patriarchal forces of power through a statist totalitarian metaphor. Walby explores the multifaceted nature of patriarchal oppression by grouping the various ways women are subordinate to and oppressed by men into six categories, including gender-based differences

224 Sawicki 359.

225 Bartky 79.

in employment, the gendered nature of household tasks, and the cultural perpetuation of patriarchy. What is interesting to this analysis is that in *THT*, all six categories have been taken over by the state. The Republic of Gilead micromanages women's roles in society from their employment right down to their household tasks and even creates its own system to perpetuate patriarchal culture in the form of its new Bible. Gilead is patriarchy made manifest. As a literary dystopia can critique reality in terms not normally available to the discourse of the actual. *THT* borrows the metaphoric language of political totalitarianism to depict patriarchy as a form of social totalitarianism.

Is the metaphor of Gilead accurate for describing patriarchal power? Disciplinary power that is dispersed and self-reproduced is hard to compare to political totalitarianism. Fraser says that Foucault's critique of internalized, self-disciplinary power is contradictory.[226] How is power oppressive if we enact it on ourselves? She argues power can only be understood in the terms of humanist personal sovereignty because we have no other value system by which to define freedom. Women were of course politically "free" within 1980s American patriarchy, but examining all the micro-processes of patriarchal oppression in aggregate, as both Faludi and Walby did, reveals that some other force, not definable in humanist terms, was oppressing women. Fraser says that we have no way to critique Foucault's disciplinary oppression except in the humanist political terms of "autonomy, reciprocity, dignity, and human rights".[227] As literature, not prescribing to the actual, *THT* works within exactly this linguistic framework proposed by Fraser. It represents and critiques the everyday

226 Fraser UP 26.

227 Ibid 57.

disciplinary forces of patriarchal power in political, statist, and legal terms that are understandable within the liberal world view. Offred is legally bound to her domestic patriarch. If she refuses to bear a child, she will be removed from society. These are institutionalized examples of the real power of patriarchy in many women's lives. Offred lives within a literal totalitarian state which is a depiction of the metaphorically totalitarian influence of patriarchy in a supposedly democratic state like America. Gilead shows what a state would look like that actually enacts patriarchal rules, but it thereby reveals a reality for many women of its era. Despite the fact that patriarchy is a decentralized form of power, *THT* reveals that patriarchal forces can be nonetheless as powerful as a centralized Patriarch that dictates the oppressive norms of gender.

5.iv **– Resistance from Within**

If analyzing *THT* using Foucauldian terms of power produces a fruitful understanding of patriarchal forces, it is valuable to evaluate acts of resistance against power in *THT* in the same terms. Does *THT* suggest that women can successfully resist patriarchal power?

A key problem that Foucault saw in society was the difficulty in challenging a disciplinary power that has become so normalized that it is invisible.[228] How can one oppose regimes of oppression if they are hidden? This is one of the reasons even the mere awareness, the unmasking of patriarchal apparatuses of power, is an act of resistance. When forces of power, like patriarchies, succeed by their very invisibility and self-denial,[229] the mere existence of subjective

228 Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* New York: Penguin Books. P306.

229 Foucault HoS 86.

narratives that articulate the experiences of patriarchal oppression to the mainstream is an act of resistance against power. Offred's telling of her subjective experience is one such act of resistance, often analyzed by other critics, that is understandable in Foucauldian terms. She attempts to unmask the forces of oppression in Gilead. Does Offred's story resist power? In her own life, in her own mind, which is a no less significant space, yes. But more broadly, in society, no. Her story is not read in Gilead, and it is appropriated and misread in the time that comes after. Hogsette argues storytelling can only successfully resist power if it is read,[230] but there is an extent to which power can be resisted at any point of control, at any point at which it exerts pressure.[231] If patriarchal forces act even on women's own imaginations by limiting the stories that are available to them—for example, by reading to them only from Gilead's version of the Bible—then even one's imagination is a battlefield of power—even telling oneself stories, reinscribing one's imagination, can be a form of resistance against patriarchal forces. Even Foucault's own genealogies, like Offred's narrative, are an attempt to fight power by revealing the invisible strengths of the disciplinary power apparatus.

Foucault has analyzed how the body is another such battlefield. As the very focal point of patriarchal power is women's bodies,[232] the body itself can become a site of submission or resistance to power.[233] If patriarchal forces dictate norms for female sexuality, then a woman who seeks out personal pleasure rather than following social norms pushes back against power. This is the argument that, by choosing passion with Nick rather than helping the May

230 Hogsette 277.

231 Cook 110.

232 Ibid 92.

233 Foucault P/K 56.

Day resistance fight the state, Offred was nonetheless engaging in her own act of resistance. If society tells you that you cannot choose your partner, then choosing your partner is a rebellious act, says Atwood.[234] In this regard, it is a successful act of resistance because she has subverted the state's demands on her body. That Nick ultimately leads to Offred's bodily salvation at the conclusion of the novel is indicative of the fact that *THT* portrays Offred's relationship with Nick in a positive light. Foucault, however, warns that resistance is not the same as freedom. Resistance exists at the point of every action of power;[235] power is in fact defined by its ability to dominate that which resists it. Foucault warns about thinking of all sexual agency as a successful form of resistance: "We must not think that saying yes to sex, one says no to power."[236] When Offred submits to the Commander, because she had a choice whether or not to be there or in the labour camps, saying yes is not an act of resistance; it is an act of submission to power under threat of punishment. Even though Offred argues unironically that it was "not rape" because she chose domestic domination over the labour camps, *THT* is likely revealing its anti-woman historical positionality in this facet of the story. In 1991, 30 states in America had not criminalized martial rape. A huge section of the population did not believe women could withhold consent from their husbands.[237] The question is, was Offred under any less pressure when she said yes to Nick than when she said yes to the Commander? Did the system of power really forbid Offred from choosing Nick when it was Serena Joy who suggested Offred conceive a child with Nick? Power is productive; submitting to it brings

234 Atwood Genesis 19.

235 Foucault Hos 95.

236 Ibid 156.

237 Faludi xiv.

advantages. The soldiers of Gilead may have looked the other way, allowing Offred to sleep with Nick even as she has to cross the flood-lit lawns to get to his apartment, because she will produce a child for the state. Even Offred speculates that they must know she continues to sleep with Nick.[238] Is willingly submitting to the demands of patriarchal forces, as Serena Joy did when she was a spokeswoman for religious conservatives in the time before, actually an act of resistance?

For Offred, when she chose Nick, the answer is yes, it is an act of resistance against patriarchal power. While Foucault argues that sexuality and sexual bodies are socially constructed, pleasure and the flesh are something more primal that exist underneath social constructs. When Offred seeks out Nick again and again, breaks norms and risks punishment to do so, she is pursing the purer wants of her flesh. The attention Offred as narrator gives to describing the eroticism of her encounter with Nick makes this apparent.[239] Choosing Nick is a moment of independence for Offred, who rejects both Radical Feminism's push for a hatred of men and the New Right's demand for conventional, household relationships. Even the patriarchal forces of Gilead, which dictate almost every aspect of women's lives, have been fought back in Nick's bedroom, a place where there are still illegal cigarettes and sex for pleasure. *THT* reflects a perspective within feminism that in a world where patriarchal forces are all pervasive but not all equally potent, power can still be pushed back through personal acts of resistance. By choosing pleasure, Offred engaged in a localized form of resistance that reduced patriarchal power in her own life.

238 Atwood *THT* 252.

239 Ibid 245-7.

To the extent that patriarchy is disciplinary, even one's own actions can be a site of resistance against it. To the extent that patriarchy is multifaceted and diverse, a network of individual forces, it can be overcome in one area without having to be defeated entirely. And to the extent that patriarchy is reproduced uniquely in each individual's life, changing unevenly across society, one's personal acts of resistance can be much more meaningful under the form of patriarchy described by Walby than that in Gilead. By writing her story, Offred engaged in a much larger form of resistance that had the power to share her experience, declare her subjectivity separate from her purpose as a walking womb, and challenge totalitarian definitions of normality in society. The question is, by writing her story, does Atwood, like Offred, successfully push back against patriarchal influences in North America?

Chapter 6 – Patriarchal Influences on *The Handmaid's Tale*

If patriarchal forces are all-pervasive, affecting every facet of society to some degree, right down to the text of *The Handmaid's Tale* itself, there is an extent to which Atwood's critique of patriarchal pressures in society itself may reproduce some of patriarchal norms of its era. The text itself exists within power's net-like structure[240], and according to Foucault, there are no gaps of complete freedom within the "meshes" of the net(work) of power.[241] As such, no text can be free from the influences of power. *THT* exists at the site of both the production and reproduction of patriarchal forces, and their traces have been left on the text itself, which was produced within the ideological limits imposed by a normalized patriarchal world. That so many have called *THT* a *feminist* dystopia says that it has no doubt succeeded in challenging the patriarchal status quo as well on some level, but in this chapter I ask, how far does it go? And in the limits that it reaches, are not other disciplinary constraints of patriarchal power made tangible?

In *Section 6.i* of this chapter, I look at financial and genre-based constraints produced on *THT* within the context of a patriarchal-capitalist free market, and in *Section 6.ii*, I consider to what extent these constraints have compromised *THT*'s ability to critique patriarchal norms.

240 Foucault P/K 98.

241 Ibid 142.

6.i – **Patriarchy in Publishing**

It is important to consider the financial influences produced on texts within patriarchal-capitalism. In many interviews, Atwood has danced around the word feminist, seemingly not wanting to apply it to herself. This public position undoubtedly reproduces patriarchy's simultaneous delegitimization and cooption of the women's liberation movement—delegitimizing it by saying that feminism has gone too far and is thus too radical or coopting it by saying feminism is unnecessary because liberation has already been achieved. Atwood's careful rejection of the label could be a form of internalized misogyny, in which Atwood does not see herself as the ally of other women in their struggles; it could be that she simply doesn't like labels; or it could be that her denial of the word 'feminist' is a form of self-preservation in a patriarchal-capitalist world. When an author gives an interview or writes an article about their book, it is essentially an advertising spot for the novel disguised as news. Atwood's livelihood, like that of many people, depends on her public appearance, and in a patriarchal world, how we judge people, and whether or not we give them a job or buy their book, is based on standards of normalization that have been created under patriarchy. That Atwood was reticent to call herself a feminist may be indicative of her politics, just as it may be be indicative of her era when the label "feminism", much more commonly accepted today, had yet to be co-opted by capitalism to sell 'girl-power' products. In the era of *THT*, being associated with Radical Feminists, like those criticized in novel, often hurt one's ability to earn an income in a patriarchal-capitalist world. As discussed previously, those women who were succeeding financially in the 1980s were more like Phyllis Schafly, more likely to toe the

conservative patriarchal party line. If Atwood had called the novel a “feminist novel”, it might not have sold as well due to the backlash of patriarchal forces that could manifest against the book in the so-called free market. This is how patriarchal power is productively reproduced; those texts that distance themselves from feminism are more likely to sell well. Whatever the reason Atwood has been reticent to call the novel a feminist one, all these forces are at work in the decision, and the fact that the novel’s Liberal Feminist politics are disguised is another facet of its positionality among the patriarchal-capitalist forces of its age.

A frequent topic in feminist literary criticism has been the multiple ways patriarchal influences are enforced on women writers: through a patriarchal academia, which has been slow to accept women writers into the canon;[242] through the patriarchal ‘free’ market, which was reluctant to publish, market, and buy women’s stories in the mainstream;[243] and, finally, through patriarchal influences in cultural imagination, and these three interconnected and self-producing forces feed into each other and maintain the borders of the main-/male-stream of literature. “Culture is male,” wrote Russ, a fellow woman writer, a decade before *THT* was published.[244] The masculine imagination shaped our canonical stories and through them our culture, and that makes it all the more challenging now for women to write about women. When Atwood listed the many utopias and dystopias she read to prepare to write *THT*, all but one were written by men.[245] When asked about the other “feminist dystopias”,

242 Annette Kolodny. “Dancing Through the Minefield.” *Feminist Studies*, Vol 6, No 1, 1980. p103.

243 Kolodny 100.

244 Joanna Russ. “What Can a Heroine Do? or Why Women Can't Write?” *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction.* Indiana University Press, 1995. p80.

245 Atwood Genesis 8-9.

she brushed them off as possible influences, saying “I read for pleasure.”[246] Importantly, Atwood was writing her dissertation on eighteenth and nineteenth century romance literature. She had been exposed to women’s stories of the past, but when it came to contemporary dystopias, she apparently avoided them. This sort of positionality within culture shapes the types of stories that are normalized to a writer. Furthermore, both the writer’s normative imaginative limits and the market forces created by the demands of the reading public’s normative imaginative limits put historical pressure on the types of stories women can tell. For example, if a woman writer in the publishing industry of 1970s had wanted to follow the patterns of Western myths such as theorized by Joseph Campbell,[247] but instead wished to use a woman as the hero, the writer's work would fail on two fronts, according to Russ; at the time, it would have ended up being either a “ludicrous” satire in which a woman takes on a role seen as typically masculine,[248] and it would have to abandon those narratives typically connected with women’s experiences, which are typically “marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order”, according to Moi.[249] The dilemma for women writers of the previous century who wanted to publish in the mass-market was that feminine characters were not active; they had been forced into passive roles which did not sell beyond a women’s readership.[250]

Russ proposed three methods that could be used by women writers in the 1970s to write stories with feminine heroines that would gain some level of

246 Ibid Genesis 15.

247 See Joseph Campbell. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces.*

248 Russ 83.

249 Toril Moi. "Feminist, Female, Feminine". *The Feminist Reader.* Np:np, 1989. p126.

250 Russ 88.

respect in the mainstream, and all three of them are used in *THT* to a certain extent. The first method for women writers was to employ genres in which a woman can more easily be the protagonist within existing conventions. This included science fiction, within which *THT* fits as a speculative dystopia, because a hero of either traditional gender can take on the role of discovering a new world. Women can be protagonists in *Alice in Wonderland*-type plots. Russ's second method is to write from life, rather than following Campbell's monomyth, allowing the writer to explore a woman's experiences in a very naturalistic, observational plot.[251] However, this style is often rejected by critics because "nothing happens"; it does not match the expectations created by the Western cannon.[252] Both of these plot elements—discovering a new world and describing feminine life experience—are combined in *THT*. Women in Gilead are part of what Russ would call an "unofficial, minor culture" that does not take the lead in stories.[253] Though there is a resistance movement—what might have been the main action in the story for a male protagonist—Offred hardly becomes involved until she is rescued. The people of status in society are the male soldiers, and the narrator's role both in society and in the plot is defined in relation to them—whether she is given to the Commander to carry his child or rescued at the end by Nick who is part of the underground resistance. The heroine's story as a handmaid is a stereotypically feminine story in a masculine-dominated world. She does not try to escape, go on a journey, or enact revenge, as a masculine hero would in the Western canon. In this way, the conventions of the sci-fi genre allow a woman to be the heroine who communicates about her world to the reader, but instead of taking on an active

251 Ibid 92.

252 Ibid 88.

253 Ibid 80.

role in that world, Offred explores a uniquely female and feminine perspective in a role designated by her reproductive capacity.

The third method that women writers employ to write about heroines is what Russ calls the “lyric style”, pioneered by Virginia Woolf. This is significant to *THT* and the ability of fiction to engage with the world of the actual because the lyric style, which is available to those authors with a certain “command of language”, weaves a plot around a difficult-to-articulate central concept.[254] This allows a writer to engage with topics that are outside the themes of traditional narratives, and because of its artistic nature, it is more broadly accepted by literary critics. The lyric structure of *THT* thus helps advance its anti-patriarchal critique of society. A lyric structure “can deal with the unspeakable”;[255] it is useful when no action, plot, or traditional myth can “embody in clear, unequivocal, immediately graspable terms” the experience that a writer wishes to convey.[256] The concept of patriarchal oppression is this kind of indescribable experience that can be explored through the lyric structure. Though parts of *THT* do follow a chronological plot thread, it is woven through what Russ would call “various images, events, scenes, or memories” that cycle around an “unspoken, invisible centre”[257]. The novel is divided into sections, like “Shopping” and “Birth Day”, that move through the present plot while simultaneously exploring the same theme through memories of both the transition into the Gilead and of the time before it. This allows elements of patriarchal society to be explored through juxtaposition and contrast. For example, Chapter Fifteen, in the “Household” section, combines scenes from

254 Ibid 88.

255Ibid 90.

256 Ibid 88.

257Ibid 87.

the present narrative with past memories in order to explore the idea of power within the domestic sphere. In the present, the Commander, who essentially owns the handmaids and the servants as slaves, must still knock to enter the room of the women.[258] The narrator then empathizes with his loneliness of being watched by, but not connecting with, the women in the room.[259] In the memory that follows, Moira attempts to flee the training centre and is returned with her feet beaten by a frayed wire, revealing what happens to women who do not submit to their role as child bearers.[260] The two together show the double edged and yet disproportionate effects of power in the household. The man is unhappy in his rigidly defined role, but the women will be beaten if they try to escape. It is through this form of lyric association of events, not strict dramatic or chronological plot, that *THT* criticizes the difficult to describe power differential between men and women in patriarchal society.

What effect does this have on *THT*? By fitting within a genre that allows female heroines, using a naturalistic plot about everyday life in Gilead, and using a poetic "lyric" structure to explore thematic issues, *THT* followed all three conventions that, a decade earlier, Russ said women writers were using to write about stories with traditionally feminine protagonists in the mainstream. *THT* is thus subversive to the extent that it successfully shares a women's story and a critique of patriarchy more widely; however it is submissive to the extent that in order to do so, it had to follow patriarchal norms for women's stories. This is again how patriarchal power is productively reproduced. Even a text that critiques patriarchy must still fit within prescribed gender norms in order to be accepted by the main-/male-stream. *THT*, like this

258Atwood *THT* 81.

259 Ibid 84.

260 Ibid 87.

very thesis, is vulnerable to the New Historicist trap of propagating the very apparatus of power that the text seeks to challenge: “Every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practises it exposes.”[261] On one side of a dialectic of power is a resistance to patriarchal forces, and the other is their reproduction. Every text, every action, has a uniquely constructed positionality within this dialectic of resistance to and reproduction of disciplinary forces, and even texts that subvert the expectations of the mainstream must inherently fit within the norms dictated by the mainstream.

6.ii **– Resistance or Reproduction in Offred’s Rescue**

The final scene of the novel gets to the aporia at the heart of the dialectic of Atwood’s subversion or submission, resistance or reproduction, within patriarchal forces. As mentioned above, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has a very naturalistic plot. Nothing in it hasn’t already happened in other times and places, as Atwood says, and the protagonist is no super human. Her acts of resistance to power are personal, not heroic. The one point from which the whole text deviates from this realism, however, is Offred’s rescue by Nick at the end of the novel. The man who Offred falls in love with happens to be a member of the underground resistance and happens to be able to swoop in at the last minute, like the trope of the knight in shining armour, to rescue her. This act justifies and rewards Offred’s act of resistance, which was to choose pleasure with Nick rather than spy on the Commander for Ofglen. By choosing Nick, the narrator chooses the path of heteronormative love over sisterly solidarity, and while Ofglen dies in the end, Offred is rewarded for her choice

261 Veeser NH xi.

with her rescue. This ultimate scene, this climax of the plot, in which Offred is rescued, is the pivot point on which *THT* sits within patriarchal forces. Offred's rescue by her love interest fits firmly within the romantic genre, which Atwood studied at Harvard, and which has so often been relegated to the margins by society, dismissed as emotive, unintellectual, and 'chick-lit'.[262] Does Nick's rescue of Offred indicate Atwood's subversive use of a romance trope, an argument that women's stories are worth telling, their sides of the story worth hearing, even if all they want is to be rescued by a knight in shining armour? Or does Offred's rescue in Nick's hands—the ultimate loss of her agency and importance to being overshadowed by a masculine protagonist—indicate a regressive adherence to patriarchal genre standards of a traditional happily-ever-after that robs Offred of her power and robs the book of its subversive potential?

Women's "sentimental" fiction—featuring stereotypical characters, typical gender norms, and plots that play on emotions—has long been popular among under-employed women, and perhaps because of this last reason, it has long been rejected by the literary main-/male-stream.[263] Tompkins makes the case that such fiction is equally deserving of scholarship.[264] The texts of women's stories—written by women, for women—carry with them the voices and realities of their era. Despite their exclusion from academia and many men's book shelves, such novels were nonetheless hugely popular with a large percentage of the population. When women characters are rescued by men characters, it is often perceived by men as mere wish-fulfilment and fantasy for the women readers, but that romantic relationships with men are pivotal to the

262 Tompkins 207.

263 Ibid.

264 Ibid 216.

plot of women's novels actually represents substantial, material realities in the lives of readers. Many women in the heavily patriarchal societies of the past cannot achieve success by any means except with the support of a man's patronage. That the romance heroine's wishes come true when her marriage lasts happily-ever-after is not indicative of simple fantasy but actually a complex relationship with patriarchal socio-economic forces of her era. For many impoverished women, a marriage into wealth may be the *only* path to living happily ever after. Tompkins defends typically feminine genres like "Sunday-school fiction", which deals with religious lessons in the household, by saying it interacts with the cultural world of the readers.[265] When Atwood said at a young age that she wanted to be a writer, she mentions she had an Aunt who wrote "Sunday-school fiction", but she did not consider that at the time to be 'real' writing.[266] The same patriarchal forces that dismiss women's genres as insignificant and marginal were felt by Atwood at a young age and would have later influenced *THT*. To some extent, the text would be pressured to fit within patriarchal standards, but it would also to some extent resist those standards. *THT* is not "sentimental" fiction. If the novel had closely followed the conventions of traditionally women's genres it would not have been taken seriously by the main-/male-stream. Instead, *THT* uses a feminine protagonist, as discussed earlier but closely follows the male-defined cannon of dystopia—right up until the end, when Offred is whisked away by the real hero of the novel.

Moi raises an important criticism that a female perspective doesn't necessarily make the story a feminist one. This critique is important for Russ

265 Ibid.

266 Margaret Atwood. *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing.* London: Virgo Press, 2003. p13.

because it differentiates between the sorts of stories that have a stereotypical or one-dimensional female protagonists—like the “Bitch Goddess” that perpetuates the idea of women as “The Other”[267]—and the sorts of stories that expand the way readers perceives their own culture—by, for example, including myths of women and other marginalized people.[268] Moi makes the point because works that feature women's experiences can still display them in “alienating, deluded, or degrading ways."[269] An example they both give is the romance lead, criticized by Russ, whose only goal in life is to fall in love with a man.[270] This analysis suggests that *THT* would fail at expanding the stories available to women if it only perpetuates the myth that women's primary roles in life are that of mother and wife. Offred does perpetuate these stereotypes somewhat. She was written to be the desperate mother and the longing lover. Her primary goal is to reconnect with her daughter; her primary action is to choose Nick as her partner. The significance of her camaraderie with her friend Moira in her life breaks this stereotype, but only to a certain extent. Her hopes and her actions are still the stereotypically feminine pursuit of family. She is defined by her familial connections rather than her career, her aspirations, or her actions. Literature is only feminist, according to Moi, if it "takes a discernible anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position".[271] While *THT* is itself radical and feminist, in that it makes tangible patriarchal oppression, tells a story from the margins, and thrusts the subjective experiences of an individual woman to the fore, *THT* also reinforces patriarchal norms when Offred criticizes

267 Russ 82.
268 Ibid 90.
269 Moi 121.
270 Russ 84.
271 Moi 132.

Radical Feminists as if they represent all feminists, pursues her love interest rather than her freedom, and is ultimately rescued by her lover. Tompkins says that feminine stories do have subversive potential in the mainstream, but Moi would point out that they waste that potential if they only reinforce feminine stereotypes. In this sense, *THT* can be approached from two angles; in crafting her novel the way she did, Atwood could be a conservative Aunt or the liberal Offred:

On the one side, Atwood as writer of *THT* is an Aunt, a conservative, a regressive relic of a previous ideological age. She and the other Aunts together criticize the Radical Feminists; she and the Aunt's together reinforce patriarchal norms of society, saying if women do not have a patron's support, they will not be rescued. Moira, and the other lesbians and feminists have been coopted by Gilead. They now perform in the brothels, and Moira begins to like it. Only the path of love for one's partner and a traditional, monogamous, child-producing family will allow Offred to escape the power of Gilead into the arms of her stronger, masculine lover. *THT* does not dictate Offred's choices to the reader, but it normalizes them in an unconscious, unexamined way. In *THT*, a proper woman's path is that of finding a man and raising a family. The text reproduces the patriarchal disciplinary apparatus that dictates women's behaviour in the same way that the Aunts do to the handmaids.

On the other side, Atwood is an Offred, an independent liberal, a storyteller that has the power to challenge the main-/male-stream precisely because she comes from within the feminine margins. Atwood's story is a woman's story that speaks to experiences that, while not common to *all* women, are nonetheless common. The desire to have a partner, a capable partner, a caring partner, who is able to help you when you need it, is a genuine material benefit

in the lives of people who face patriarchal oppression. When you are threatened with destitution, an alliance with someone who is better situated in society is not an act of weakness, but an act of self-preservation. A happy ending, in which Offred escapes and may see Nick again someday, helps the novel sell better and help Atwood's story reach more readers. And when the dominant power of society marginalizes and dismisses a woman's wants, simply to declare her desires—to make them known by telling her story, to contribute her voice to the mainstream discourse as a feminine woman—is a rebellious act.

The conundrum is that *THT* is critical of Radical Feminists for essentializing femininity, but it does the same thing when the heroine's act of resistance against the state is simply to play the role of a romance heroine and be rescued by a masculine hero. Is this subversive or ultimately reinforcing? Is this empowering or merely reflective of the constraints of patriarchal forces in her life? Does it represent a woman's right to choose her own path? Or is it actually prescriptive of gender norms? The answer is that, of course, it does all of these things to different degrees. Showalter describes how women writers in the 1960s often found themselves in a double bind:[272] should they write proudly with female and feminine mythologies and face an uphill battle for acceptance within the main-/male-stream? Or should they prove their equal ability to meet current literary standards by assimilating into the masculine mainstream? It is important to note, however, that whether *THT* submits to patriarchal pressures to mimic the mainstream dystopian cannon or submits to gender-essentializing pressures to ensure female characters have traditionally feminine plots, both are still acts of submission to patriarchal norms. It is all of these

272 Elaine Showalter. "The Female Tradition" np:np, 1977. p285.

aforementioned patriarchal forces which operate at the level of the text. The extent to which the text responds to and engages with these forces shows its political positionality within a dialectic between resistance to and reproduction of patriarchal power in the time and place of the text.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion: Redescriptions of Reality

The word ‘Patriarchy’ is a challenging, clumsy, and perhaps inaccurate dead metaphor. For someone like myself who has never experienced the gender-based marginalization that women have, it is a hard metaphor to use, harder still to connect to reality, and hardest of all to imagine experiencing. Theorists have described patriarchy as a multifaceted, dynamic system of historically constructed social structures that advantages those who adhere to the masculine mainstream and disadvantages everyone else.[273] Because of its nature, shifting unevenly over time, I have proposed that it is better not to think of one ‘patriarchy’, but in fact a mosaic of patriarchies that manifest differently at the site of every individual who feels the disciplinary pressures of patriarchal forces. It is impossible then to understand the whole of patriarchy just as it is impossible to understand all of human experience, but one can begin to get an image of the concept of patriarchy through its constitutive parts. It is thus at the exact sites of patriarchal influence, at the individual experiences of those who have been subject to it, that the unique historically-situated facets of patriarchal power are made known.

The Handmaid’s Tale is a fiction, but it is also one woman’s criticism of a growing patriarchal influence on the society of her era. When I read *THT* for the first time thirty years after it was written, I began to gain an empathetic understanding of what patriarchy might be like, not just for Offred, but for

273 *Section 5.i-ii.*

Margaret Atwood. I saw *THT* as a work of feminist literature, a gender dystopia, that made tangible the patriarchal forces of Atwood's time and place. I wanted to know how it did it. I wanted to know how this text, supposedly a fiction, was able to communicate something about the reality within which it was written, the reality of one woman's perception of America in the 1980s.

Fiction, I discovered, is not so far removed from reality. I read widely in order to understand how something labelled fiction could communicate facts, and the conclusion that I came to is that we have long relied on stories, metaphors, analogies, and other literary techniques to communicate about reality. It is only through the written word that we can know the world around us, and all written words contain within themselves just as much a connection to as they do a distance from the truth.[274] What we commonly think of as fiction is only a form of lawless language, not bound to the rules of reality; but in those wildlands of their imagination, some authors come awfully close to the border fence of reality, and when they do, they may be able to tell us something new about our world in a way we had never thought of before.

As our dictionary of dead metaphors has been created mostly by mainstream authors, it turns out that the living metaphors of fiction are an ideal resource to communicate the experiences of those that exist on the margins, indescribable with conventional language. By not prescribing to the actual, fiction has the ability to communicate whole feelings, concepts, and experiences for which words do not yet exist. It has the ability to push the bounds of what we think we know about our world, and because of its emotive quality, it can reveal a side to reality that is not quantifiable by any other

274 *Section 3.i.*

method.[275] Precisely because fiction embraces its subjective voice, it gives equal importance to every subject with a voice. The dominant narrative in the latter half of the twentieth century said that there was no more need for feminism because women were now equal in society to men. Fiction was one of the tools women used to challenge that dominant narrative and reveal the actual experiences of half of society that for centuries had been marginalized.

The more I pursued theories that engaged with the question of how fiction can communicate fact to understand how it was fiction could tell me about the experiences of another time and place, the more I realized there was no one theoretical framework for understanding the interaction between literature and the world of the actual. The many methodologies that had been used followed as few rules as fiction itself. I discovered, out of New Historicism, that every study needs its own unique approach built around both the object and objective of its research.[276] I needed to construct my own unique theoretical framework in order to understand how a patriarchal dystopia could communicate another's experiences of gender-based oppression, across generation and gender, from Margaret Atwood to me.

Feminist and post-colonial theories I had been exposed to informed me that the best way to understand someone else's oppression is to listen to them, so I began my analysis by listening to what Atwood had to say.[277] She wanted to critique certain trends that she saw in her contemporary society, and so she chose the genre of dystopia to do so. There was a growing anti-woman sentiment in America at the time, and Atwood wanted to reveal what kind of society that sentiment would create if the people who espoused it were taken

275 *Section 2.ii.*

276 *Section 4.i.*

277 *Chapter 2.*

at their word.[278] The genre of dystopia allowed her to take the unsaid assumptions within their ideologies, the punitive measures it would take to enforce their beliefs on women, and extrapolate those assumptions into a fictional society.[279] The fact that it was a fiction, the story of an individual, allowed Atwood to show what it would be like living in such a brutally patriarchal society.

As I began to explore Atwood's text and its context to see what each illuminated about the other, I began to notice that there was something else going on in the text. If Atwood opposed patriarchal oppression, why didn't she appreciate the efforts of Radical Feminists? Why was she also critiquing the unspoken assumptions at the heart of their ideology? Atwood's text not only unmasks the ideologies of those she was critiquing, *THT* also reveals Atwood's own unique, historically-situated ideological position at the time the text was produced. She was likely a Liberal Feminist who eschewed the label, believed that women were on equal terms with men so long as the New Right didn't take over, and thought Radical Feminists were going too far.[280] Although Atwood was using the genre of dystopia to intentionally critique the New Right and certain new developments in feminism, her text also reveals her own unique interpretation of her reality at the time. Ideologies can only ever be criticized from the position of another ideology,[281] and that is what was happening in *THT*.

Atwood's ideology, in this sense, far from being a pejorative term, is created from the whole of her subjective life experience. As texts are shaped

278 *Section 3.iii.*

279 *Section 3.ii.*

280 *Section 4.iii.*

281 *Section 4.i.*

by authors, authors influenced by ideologies, and ideologies historically created, it is possible to think of texts as being created by the unique positionality of the author-as-nexus at the confluence of a multitude of historical forces. This subjective positionality of an author within history is both one of the strengths and weaknesses of a text. Atwood's ideology may create blind spots in her perception of things she has not experienced—normalized hierarchies of race and class, for example[282]—but her subjective perception creates the whole strength of the text when it comes to *THT*'s depiction of patriarchal oppression. It is from her position on the gender margin that the forces which produce gender hierarchies are best illuminated. Beyond the intentions of her critique, Atwood's extrapolation of patriarchal oppression into the state of Gilead shows the unique ways that she experienced patriarchal forces within in her own society.[283]

The dystopia of Gilead reveals a vision of patriarchal forces that is in line with how feminist thinkers have applied Foucault's capillaric apparatus of power to the concept patriarchy.[284] Patriarchy in *THT* is a complex, multifaceted, and all-pervasive power that manifests as a disciplinary force in every action and reaction in society. It shows how, in Foucauldian terms, patriarchal discipline can be productive, how if you go along with it, you are rewarded, and it shows how patriarchy is not equally strong everywhere, how it can be pushed back and even overcome. Offred's actions reveal that patriarchy can be resisted at some points of influence, and every successful act of resistance diminishes its power. Patriarchy as envisioned by a Foucauldian reading of the dystopia of *THT* is omnipresent, but it is not omnipotent.

282 *Section 4.ii.*

283 *Section 5.ii-iii.*

284 *Section 5.ii.*

Whether or not Atwood was aware of it, the normalizing influence of patriarchal forces stretch so far that they pervade even the text that she wrote.[285] In this sense, I was challenged to ask whether her text was itself a successful act of resistance or whether it simply reproduced society's patriarchal norms.[286] Was Offred's rescue in the hands of her love interest a bold statement of the legitimacy of romance narratives? Or was it a traditional adherence to patriarchal trope of the damsel in distress? I did not find an answer to this question, and this exposes both the strengths and weaknesses of my method. Analyzing the historical positionality of a text reveals the forces at work within it, but their uncovering can lead to no conclusions about what 'actually happened'.

Nonetheless, in my endeavour to use *THT* to understand the forces of patriarchal oppression in the era in which I was born, I have come a little bit closer. Whether or not Atwood successfully resists or merely reproduces patriarchal norms in society, the text shows that she was subject to that exact patriarchal pressure. THT reveals one historically-situated experience of patriarchal oppression, and even where Atwood stops short of critiquing patriarchal norms, the place where she stops reveals the shape of patriarchy of her era. In the text's interaction with patriarchal forces, it has been shaped by them. Even though I cannot measure how strong the influence of two poles within a dialectic of resistance and reproduction within the text, I can measure the trace they left behind. This thesis has shown that while literature does not reveal 'what actually happened', it does reveal at least one facet of the past: the unique historical positionality of the author at the confluence of various

285 *Section 6.i.*

286 *Section 6.ii.*

social, political, and other forces. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cultural record of the patriarchal pressures of its era.

I cannot conclude to what extent the particular experiences of one author reveals the plurality of similar experiences in society, but it is clear that *THT* has resonated widely. For many, the novel as a metaphor has redescribed reality in a unique and productive way. Whitebrook says literature has the ability to contribute to our political vocabulary.[287] In the same way that the word “Orwellian” has entered our lexicon, *THT* has now contributed a form of metaphoric comparison useful for communicating about the world of the real. When a woman who survived an extremist Christian community not unlike Gilead needs a symbol of strength, she gets a tattoo reading “NTBC”, for *nolite te bastardes carborundorum* from the novel, meaning, “Don’t let the bastards grind you down.”[288] When women protest an anti-abortion law in Texas, they arrive at the courthouse in the red gowns and white bonnets of the handmaids, saying, silently, this is what you will turn us into if we cannot access abortions.[289] For them, *THT* may only be a fiction, but it is not so far removed from reality.

In this thesis, I too have necessarily only written a fiction. My words and my analysis are only metaphoric approximations of reality. My proposal that the author is the nexus point at the confluence of the various forces that have produced the text, is only a metaphor; my conclusion that Gilead is a totalitarian representation of patriarchy in liberal statist terms, is only a metaphor; but the effect of these metaphors is real. Metaphors interact with

287 Whitebrook 60.

288 Hattinger np.

289 Catherine Pearson. “Women Wore 'Handmaid's Tale' Robes To The Texas Senate.” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/women-wore-handmaids-tale-robes-to-texas-senate_us_58d034bee4b0ec9d29de74f5 Accessed May 30, 2017.

the ‘real’ world because they are the only terms through which we can understand the world beyond our five physical senses. If a subjective narrative is called “biased”, as if any written word can escape the bias of its positionality, then women’s stories of oppression can be dismissed. If a foetus is called an “unborn baby”, then women’s bodies can be enslaved to produce children for men. The metaphors we use to understand our reality really matter.

If my fiction inaccurately describes reality, than I first invite criticism in the same manner that I have fashioned my critique. My intentions—the intentionality of this text—has been to understand experiences unlike my own, but I invariably can only understand them by reproducing them in my own voice, influenced by the biases of my own historical positionality. From what ideological position are my metaphors produced? What are the blind spots, the assumptions left unsaid, in my analysis? And in what ways have historical forces like patriarchy shaped and influenced this text in a way that undermines my intentions? I must admit, for example, that my analysis is Anglo-American-centric, views the North Atlantic region as an isolated phenomena, and is ignorant of the ways my culture is produced and reinforced through the exploitation of low-income regions.[290] On these matters, I invite further discourse.

Within the focus of my analysis, however, I have sought to understand only a few previously unknown facets of reality: broadly, what is one of the ways that fiction can tell us something about historical reality, and more specifically, what does *The Handmaid’s Tale* reveal about the patriarchal forces of its era? My hope is, if I am successful in answering these questions, that this

290 Spivak CtSS 86.

thesis takes on Ricœur's metaphoric function for the reader, as all language invariably does, and redescribes reality in a productive way.

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